

Social Media: A New Religion?

A Masters Thesis by Ashleigh Nicola Clarke

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Abstract

This thesis argues that in contemporary Western society, social media has become a New Religious Movement that expresses elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture. The methodological process I use throughout this thesis to convey the new religion of social media is a social constructionist mixed-methods approach, utilising an autoethnography analysis of my own social media use and a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse a sample of Instagram influencers. Key findings from the autoethnography suggest some social media users use social media platforms to create alternative realities online, present the self as worthy of devotion to encourage engagement from their followers, and that the smartphone acts as a New Age Californian Counterculture bible/sacred text substitute. Key findings from the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques suggest that the sample of Instagram influencers in this research convey some attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture on Instagram demonstrating that social media is an implicit religion. These Instagram influencers also act as contemporary totems in our contemporary Western world; they are furthermore a cult of saints social media users attach themselves to in order to help understand and explain the world around them, especially in online culture. These findings demonstrate how social media is a New Religious Movement that reflects elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture in new ways because of how social media and religion are interconnected in everyday life.

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Glossary

- Authenticity – A person, who possesses the quality of genuineness, is perceived as ‘real’ rather than fake, thoughtful, can express themselves well, are open to learning from their mistakes, and provides intimate and vulnerable details of their lives with others (Joseph, 2016).
- Baudrillard’s Hyperreality – The inability to differentiate between reality and a simulation of reality (often through technology), where the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’ are blended together with no clarity as to where one begins and where one ends (Baudrillard, 1994).
- Celebrity Worship – Where an individual becomes overly obsessed with the details of a celebrity’s personal life (Stever, 2011).
- Devotion – A strong feeling of loyalty or love, usually involving time, energy, and at times, money for a distinct purpose (Norenzayan and Shariff, 2008).
- Emotional Regulation – Refers to how individuals either modify, influence, or control their own behaviour in response to their surroundings (Hughes et al., 2020). For example, a person may continue partaking in negative behaviours to keep their mood negative (Ibid).
- Goffman’s Self-Presentation – Individuals adjust their behaviour depending on who they are with and where they are. Goffman uses the metaphors ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ to describe performances of self. The front stage refers to how someone acts/performs their character in front of an audience, whereas the back stage is where they can drop the performance suggesting that the front stage is heavily curated (Goffman, 1969). This theory has been heavily applied to the presentation of

self on social media platforms (see Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Hogan, 2010; Rudenkin, 2018; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Richey and Ravishankar, 2019).

- New Age Authenticity – Feldman (2014, pp.15-16) defines five types of authenticity that parallel authenticity in the New Age Californian Counterculture. These are:
 “Authenticity as Strong Will” – which means to be able to have the self-control necessary for how an individual should act in accordance with their best judgements;
 “Authenticity as Psychological Independence” – meaning that individuals think for themselves, often resisting conforming to society’s standards; “Authenticity as Wholeheartedness” – meaning that individuals resolve their inner conflicts to create a clear visionary path for themselves; “Authenticity as Self-Knowledge” – meaning that individuals should avoid self-deception; and “Authenticity as Moral Conscientiousness” – meaning that individuals should live up to their best moral judgements, demonstrating that living morally equates to living authentically.
- Phubbing – An alternative to ‘snubbing’ (being ignored) where a person meets up with another person in real life but spends their whole time on their device, usually scrolling social media (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, 2016).
- Religare – To bind together (Mustafi, 2019).
- Relegere – To re-read (Mustafi, 2019).
- Ritual - A ritual is a series of activities that can involve words, gestures, or objects that are often performed in a specific place and at a specific time (Grimes, 2006).
- Sacred – Connected with God, or a higher being, usually religious, and something that is deserving of great respect (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020).
- Saint – A person with a noteworthy amount of holiness or nearness to God (Williams, 2014a).

- Self-commodification – The transformation of the ‘self’ into a goods and services exchange (Davis, 2003).
- Selfie – A selfie is a picture taken by an individual of themselves (self-portrait) that is usually posted online. It is both an object and practice, a photographic object which “initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship” and practice as in a gesture “that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences” – (Senft and Baym, 2015, p. 1589).
- Self-Worship – Excessive adoration/devotion towards oneself (Merriam-Webster, n.d).
- Social Norms – These are general understandings of people in society that regulate their behaviours, inform group members on how to act and feel in certain situations, and further prescribe what reactions are deemed appropriate or not appropriate (Meek, Pacheco, and York, 2010).
- Worship – Refers to an act of religious devotion usually towards a deity and can be performed individually or in a group setting (Anderson and Foley, 2001).

Chapter One: Introduction

In contemporary Western society, with the rise of secularisation and increasing neoliberal capitalism, it is becoming common for more and more people to turn to implicit religions, such as New Religious Movements, over explicit religions because implicit religions often value individualism over collectivism (Ruck, Bentley, and Lawson, 2018; Lockhart, 2020). Many people turn to religion for reasons such as finding connections and community (Ammerman, 2014), a sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), a sense of purpose (McAdams, 2011), and often as an attempt to find meaning (Campbell, 2012). I argue a New Religious Movement has occurred implicitly through social media. The acceleration of social media technologies in everyday life, stemming from their origins in Silicon Valley, California, has reinvented the way new religions can manifest and saturate society (Luo and Kulemeka, 2017; Ratcliffe, McCarty, and Ritter, 2017; Marwick, 2018). Social media platforms have gone from being entertaining add-ons to enhance and benefit our lives into being fully integrated into our everyday life and culture (Kent and Li, 2020). These platforms are adaptive, innovative, encourage users to engage online, and have become one fundamental way that people gain information, community, and capital (Kaakinen et al., 2020). For many of us, our lives revolve around the use of technologies such as our smartphones and social media, from being constantly connected to others no matter where we are, instantly messaging friends on Facebook, providing résumés on LinkedIn, all the way to posting content on social media as a career-trajectory (Boulianne, 2019). As social media has become part of global culture, with many connotations to religion such as ‘followers,’ ‘community,’ and ‘belonging,’ this thesis argues social media has become a New Religious

Movement that expresses attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture in new ways.

For the purpose of this thesis, the definition of a New Age Californian Counterculture is a Western phenomenon stemming from the 1960s/1970s American counterculture that is made up of alternative beliefs and practices, a merging of Eastern and Western traditions, which rejects some of Western thought but not Western society. Many New Age Californian devotees create their own alternative realities, making it a personalised package of meaning that can be called a 'pick and mix' religion, where the devotee chooses aspects they like and discards the ones they do not (Aupers and Houtman, 2006).

The Research Questions

The three research questions for this thesis are:

1. Is the use of social media similar to the creation of alternative realities in New Age Californian Counterculture in that individuals use social media to create alternative realities to the one/s they had previously?
2. Do social media users present the self as worthy of devotion/worship? If so, in what ways?
3. What attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture can be applied to Instagram influencers?

To answer these three questions, I employ a socially constructionist mixed-methods approach making use of the methods autoethnography and textual analysis using visual analysis techniques. An autoethnography is a type of self-ethnography, where an individual draws upon their own experiences, observations, and reflections through the self to understand and interpret outlying social, political, and cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011; Chang, 2016). This autoethnography is threaded throughout this thesis but is predominately presented in Chapter Five. Additionally, I use a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse the top 10 most followed Instagram influencers of 2019 (Influencer Marketing, 2019). Findings from the textual analysis of Instagram influencers are presented in Chapter Six.

Findings of the autoethnography analysis suggest that social media platforms are similar to the New Age Californian Counterculture where some social media users use social media to create alternative realities as well as present the self as worthy of devotion from their followers. Further findings demonstrate that in contemporary Western society, the

smartphone is an all-encompassing device that acts as a New Age Californian bible/sacred text substitute, which people, such as myself, use to access their religion/counterculture (which, in this case, is social media). Social media platforms can enhance as well as create connections and community, provide belonging, digital distraction, and often provide a personalised package of meaning for those seeking it. Findings of the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques suggest that the sample of Instagram influencers analysed in this thesis convey some attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture. This demonstrates that these influencers are participating in this New Religious Movement without being aware they are doing so, emphasising how this is an implicit religion found in everyday life. Findings of the textual analysis also highlight that these influencers act as contemporary totems that represent cultural and symbolic values in the contemporary West; they are a cult of saints many social media users devote time to following, not that they are a replacement of God.

Implications of these findings mean that it is possible to gain a better understanding of how social media and religion are interrelated in the contemporary West, why social media users participate in certain behaviours online, and that social media platforms are often used for similar reasons as to why someone would join or affiliate with a religion. Additional implications demonstrate that people who choose to avoid the use of social media are not always privy to certain information posted online and that the smartphone and consequently, social media, has become central to the way people contact one another, which highlights how communication is changing in contemporary times. Some limitations of this research include having a limited sample size, subjectivity bias, and not using 'mega totems.' Future research should endeavour to analyse 'mega totems' to gain an understanding of what kinds of religion they might be participating in.

Thesis Outline

Chapter Two: Methodology outlines the methodological processes used in this thesis. This chapter provides the research questions, the research paradigm, and the research design. To answer the research questions, I employ a social constructionist mixed-methods approach utilising an autoethnography analysis of my own social media use and a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse a sample of Instagram influencers. These influencers were identified by a technique termed purposive sampling.

Chapter Three: The New Age Californian Counterculture provides definitions of explicit religion, implicit religion, the New Age, and the New Age Californian Counterculture. I differentiate between the New Age and the New Age Californian Counterculture because the latter is what is reflected in social media and is profoundly influenced by American counterculture. Then, I outline a history of the New Age Californian Counterculture from the 1960s to contemporary society. This chapter also gives the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture that provide a framework for a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques of Instagram influencers in Chapter Six and are also used to compare and contrast my own social media use to the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Chapter Four: The Digital Canopy: Content, Community, and Connection explores a brief history of communication technologies, the internet, and social media. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how contemporary society has developed into a digital canopy where the internet and social media can be identified as a 'digital canopy' as a play on Berger's (1967) *The Sacred Canopy*. Social media platforms exist to help people deal with feelings of existentialism and help people create their own personalised packages of meaning. Chapter Four also discusses which social media platforms are the most relevant to

the New Age Californian Counterculture, discusses the gender trends of social media users, and highlights the ways social media is currently engaged with in contemporary society.

Chapter Five: The Self, The Soul, and The Social is the autoethnography chapter, it provides some affordances of social media, my personal social media use and discusses themes such as Contemporary Religiosity, Habitual and Ritualistic Behaviour, Community and Connections, Escapism, and The Digital Canopy in relation to the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Chapter Six: #Instafamous: Devotion, Divinity, and Deities is the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques chapter. This chapter explains the different types of influencers from micro to macro, where I suggest that influencers are understood as occupying a role similar to that of the totem in Durkheim's (1912) thought, and applies the New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics to each influencer's Instagram profiles. This chapter begins with a net worth discussion of what each influencer is worth and provides some suggestions as to why certain influencers are worth more than others are. I then discuss some significant overall themes, which are Totems, Selfies, and Relatability, Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity, Commodification of Self, and Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism. Finally, I give a supporting analysis of each of the top 10 Instagram influencers with screenshots of posts from their Instagram profiles.

Chapter Seven: The Discussion is the discussion section of this thesis. I begin this chapter with a summary of my key findings from the autoethnography and textual analysis, provide some sociological interpretations of the findings exploring Smartphone Sacrifices, Secular Rituals, Belonging NOT believing, Hyper-Real Selves, and Sheilas. Following this, I

outline some implications of this research and finally give some limitations and recommendations for future research in this field.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Introduction

Digital tools such as social media enable increasing interactivity and connectedness online. Humans need sociality, often thriving in collective groups and many people may feel isolated or alone if they become detached from such groups (Berger, 1967). The use of social media can strengthen bonds, ties, connections, and communities while simultaneously providing a platform to create content and present the self in particular ways (Boyd, 2014a; Baym, 2010). The ability to personalise social media profiles allows users to display their identity, lifestyle, and manage social relationships (Ibid). Many people use social media to find out who they are, create their own 'self' brand, encourage devotion from their followers, and in turn, capitalise on this (Noor and Hendricks, 2011; Foucault, 1988). Doing 'social media research' through analysing and interpreting user-generated content allows researchers to gain insights into why people use social media, enables data to be collected in real-time, and provides opportunities to discover trends, themes, opinions, and collect a wide range of information without any geographical or time constraints (Neal, 2012). This chapter provides an overview of methods used throughout this thesis including the research questions, the research paradigm, and the research design. I use a social constructionist mixed-methods approach with both an autoethnography to analyse my own social media use, and a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse a sample of Instagram influencers to show social media is a New Religious Movement that expresses attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture in new ways.

The Research Questions

This thesis argues that social media is a New Religious Movement that expresses attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture in new ways. To create research questions based on the concept of social media as a New Religious Movement, I first had to identify a religion that allowed me to explore this idea. I chose the New Age to explore this idea because it frames the self as an entity that is worshipped and viewed as sacred (Heelas, 1996), and in social media, the self is also central and users are encouraged to commodify the self online (Isaranon, 2019; Fox et al., 2017; Luoma-aho et al., 2019). To begin, I researched the history of the New Age by reviewing relevant literature to identify how the New Age arose and spread through Western societies. I identified that the New Age became a New Age Californian Counterculture from the 1960s onwards, that is, the New Age now predominately emphasises the influence of the west coast of America. The New Age Californian Counterculture is used throughout this thesis to analyse social media. From reviewing literature on the New Age Californian Counterculture, I identified some key characteristics of the counterculture/religion. These characteristics are outlined in Chapter Three, then reiterated in Chapter Six. My research questions are based on these characteristics. Secondly, I researched a brief history of communication, the internet, and social media platforms by reviewing relevant literature to show how contemporary Western society has developed into a digital canopy¹ (Berger, 1967). This research is presented in Chapter Four and helped determine which social media platform I would choose to analyse a sample of social media influencers. As Instagram is a highly visual platform, I chose

¹ Berger's (1967) digital canopy is how he suggests religion manifests to give people many in a nihilistic world. I argue that social media can do the same.

Instagram as the most appropriate platform to analyse for this research (Laestadius, 2018).

My three research questions are as follows:

1. Is the use of social media similar to the creation of alternative realities in New Age Californian Counterculture in that individuals use social media to create alternative realities to the one/s they had previously?
2. Do social media users present the self as worthy of devotion/worship? If so, in what ways?
3. What attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture can be applied to Instagram influencers?

Question 1 was informed by Aupers and Houtman's (2006) claim that the New Age Californian Counterculture encourages people who are dissatisfied with some of Western thought to find their own personalised package of meaning and create an alternative reality, where they do not have to fully reject all of Western society (for example, by joining a commune or intentional community) to search for meaning. Question 2 was informed by Heelas's (1996) claim that in the New Age Californian Counterculture, the self is sacred and can be worshipped, and question 3 was developed to understand how Instagram influencers express attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture on Instagram.

The Research Paradigm

The research paradigm I use in this thesis is a social constructionist paradigm. I choose this paradigm to acknowledge how religion and social media are interrelated in the contemporary world. According to Stead (2004, p.391), social constructionism “emphasizes that knowledge is socially constructed through discourse and is contextually embedded. Multiple realities are recognized as being constructed and negotiated in historical time. Knowledge is therefore also a cultural process of meaning-making, as knowledge is not considered to transcend cultural meaning.” Meanings of the social world are said not to be discovered but instead constructed by humans interrelated with our ideas, language, politics, history, and society. Knowledge is co-constructed rather than individually constructed and this way of socially constructing meaning is a by-product of human existence (Butowksi et al., 2019). This means that the context we find ourselves in influences our perception of the world (Ibid). The ontology used for this research is that multiple realities and multiple subjective truths exist, where each individual experiences different realities or different versions of the same realities that can all lead to different types of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The epistemology used for this research is that these realities must be interpreted to discover underlying meanings and understandings of contemporary society (Young and Collin, 2004).

Autoethnography

As my own Instagram account is the only one I can see in its entirety, an autoethnography has been chosen for this research. In order to be able to see content from other user's profiles, a user must be logged in. This is to encourage the use of Instagram as a community, so that those who want to be a part of this community must be logged in to do so (Bell, 2019). As I need to be logged into Instagram to see content, I felt an autoethnography was the most suitable method to use for this research.

Advantages of Autoethnography

Personal experience will regularly influence research in some way; therefore, it is important to make use of subjective biases as a way of understanding self and consecutively, the world (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). Through autoethnography, researchers can gain in-depth insider meanings, can access more data through social media, and make excellent use of the sociological imagination (Anderson, 2006). An autoethnography lets researchers connect to the sociocultural aspects of the world and also encourages the reader to reflect on their own experiences, which may mean they become more socially aware of things they had not thought of before (Méndez, 2013).

Textual Analysis using Visual Analysis Techniques

Analysis of Instagram images is a relatively new interpretive research method (Laestadius, 2018). Borges-Rey (2015) used visual analysis to understand how 12 different photojournalists constructed a hyper-reality² online. To do this, Borges-Rey identified the staging of the photographs and their underlying assumptions as well as looking at the affordances of each photojournalist such as the hashtags they used, number of 'likes/comments' on each photo, how many followers they had, and what sort of post-processing techniques the photographers used. Another study conducted by Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler (2020) analysed how performative sexualised labour was visually portrayed on Instagram by 172 female influencers. They identified influencers using snowball sampling by searching generic hashtags such as '#girls' and '#beauty' and then finding sexualised shout-out Instagram pages to find and identify female influencer accounts. Data for analysis included images, captions, external links, image tags, hashtags, captions, and comments. These methods used by Borges-Rey (2015) and Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler (2020) informed the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques used in this thesis.

Textual analysis is a qualitative research method that is used to analyse cultural or media content, such as social media content, advertising, or music as texts in order to interpret the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions of the text (Fürsich, 2009). Visual analysis is a way of understanding visual elements of an image or artwork such as composition, colour, texture, and other elements, to interpret the intended meanings of the image or artwork (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this research, each Instagram image was

² A reality that is assumed to be real but is distorted in some way (Baudrillard, 1994).

interpreted for themes, patterns, and meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I also give a synopsis of each Instagram influencer before applying the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture to each influencer's profile.

Advantages of Textual Analysis using Visual Analysis Techniques

Textual analysis using visual analysis techniques has many advantages. This type of analysis allows the unobtrusive collection of data (Auriacombe, 2016), allows the research to ascertain implicit meanings and assumptions of a text-based on an analytical framework (Fürsich, 2009), and allows visual content such as social media content to be analysed (Lwin et al., 2020). With the addition of visual analysis techniques, visual elements of images can also be analysed and interpreted to find underlying meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The Research Design

Nonparticipant Observation - Digital Data

Digital data to analyse for this research has been taken from my own personal social media use as well as the top 10 most followed Instagram influencers as of 2019 according to Influencer Marketing (2019). My rationale for not terming this data as 'participants' is because they are not participants in the 'normal' active sense, as the Instagram influencers are unaware this research is being undertaken. This is so the research is unobtrusive, and the data is not interfered with by any outside influences or their own subjectivity biases (Chen, 2017). I chose to analyse myself because I am an avid Instagram user. I began my Instagram account in 2014, which was the year I began university. I started this account because I wanted a platform to post photography that would reach wider audiences than on other platforms such as Facebook. I have been using Instagram now for 7 years. Other Instagram accounts I follow used to be predominately people I know and photography-based accounts, but that has since extended to self-care and well-being accounts to help personalise my Instagram feed with positivity, and so I do not always compare my photography with professionals or other user's work. I began using this platform as a way to display my photos in a gallery-like way with no intention to find social connections. However, I have found that people on this community are often encouraging, more than any other social media platform, and as many of my followers do not know me personally, I feel a sense of gratitude for posting content they enjoy, which I measure by the amount of engagement I gain from my followers (such as likes, comments, or messages). I have made many Instagram friends who I feel that if we were to meet in real life, we would also be

friends. I have also created my own hashtag³ #acphotographylive as a way for other Instagram users to identify and search for my photography work.

To discuss how other Instagram users demonstrate the New Age Californian Counterculture, I needed data to analyse. First, I needed to identify which social media platform I would focus on. I chose Instagram, as it is a platform I use and it was the most visual platform. Then, to decide which Instagram users I was going to analyse, I searched for the most followed Instagram influencers of 2019. At first, I searched more broadly but found the most followed Instagram accounts were product brands and celebrities. I chose not to analyse these accounts because they have not created a following purely through social media, which is explained further in Chapter Seven of this thesis (Hot in Social Media, 2019). To resolve this issue, I searched for the most followed Instagram influencers as of 2019. Influencer Marketing (2019) identified the following list of influencers:

1. Huda Kattan
2. Zach King
3. Cameron Dallas
4. Chiara Ferragni
5. James Charles
6. Nikkie de Jager
7. Michelle Lewin
8. Kayla Itsines

³ Hashtags are a word or phrases preceded by the symbol '#' on social media platforms used for users to search and find specific content. They provide a specific way of organising similar content all in one place (Panko, 2017). The use of hashtags for metadata purposes were invented by Chris Messina (1981-) on Twitter when he tweeted 'how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp, [msg]?' in 2007 (Messina, 2007). For the purpose of this research, I will not be discussing hashtags any further.

9. Nash Grier

10. Camila Coelho

These Instagram influencers all had different focuses, which demonstrates that no matter the focus, social media reflects the New Age Californian Counterculture. This also emphasises how social media is similar to the New Age Californian Counterculture attribute that it is a global spiritual marketplace outlined by Sutcliffe and Gilhus (2013). Reflecting on myself as a social media user, as well as Instagram influencers, shows it is not just influencers who express attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture; everyday people like me can also express these attributes, implicitly (that is, by default, not intention). Using myself as a participant also allows other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to be analysed to show how they create community and reflect elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Data Collection

To collect data for my autoethnography analysis, I began by writing notes about my own social media use in a word document. I wrote down what I find negative and positive about using each social media platform and the reasons I choose to use each one. I then went back through old posts on each platform to find how long I had been using them and researched some contemporary themes from theory that I could relate my own social media use to. I was originally going to have one chapter for my autoethnography but I found that insights from the autoethnography inform more than the chapter dedicated to it, so decided to have this analysis threaded throughout the thesis. I also did this because, in the New Age Californian Counterculture, the self is of importance, is sacred, and is what is worshipped (Heelas, 1996) so I wanted to analyse myself to understand why I might participate in

certain behaviours online. The themes used in my autoethnography in Chapter Five to help develop wider understandings of social media being reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture are Contemporary Religiosity, Habitual and Ritualistic Behaviours, Community and Connections, Escapism, and The Digital Canopy.

To collect data for my textual analysis using visual analysis techniques, I first collected ten screenshots of each Instagram influencer's Instagram between December 2019 and February 2020 as that is the holiday period when many people have more time to post on social media (Penn, 2017). I then narrowed this down to only three screenshots from each influencer, to enable deeper analysis. To identify these images, I first looked at each Instagram influencer's overall profiles. Then, I purposively selected the ten images (or images of videos) to analyse, then narrowed this down to three images, which I also did by purposive sampling to intuitively choose the most representative examples (Guarte and Barrios, 2006). To interpret the images, I first looked at the elements of the image such as who was in the image, what was in the image, what products were in the image, and what type of clothing the influencers were wearing. I then looked at the composition of the images, that is, where the individual was placed and interpreted why they may have been placed that way, for example, in a kitchen, inside or outside, or with an animal/baby, or if there was any product placement (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I also read every caption of these images to gain an understanding of how the influencer wanted these images to be conveyed, and then briefly looked at the comments on each image to see what sort of response the influencers were obtaining from their followers. I would usually do this on most Instagram posts shown in my own feed, so I argue this was done intuitively. Responses from followers on these influencer's Instagram accounts were mostly positive. For example, user comments on Huda Kattan's Instagram referred to her as a 'Queen' a lot (Kattan, 2020).

In online culture, 'Queen' is a term used by social media users as a compliment (Buntin, 2014). This can also be understood as a term of devotion in this context (Kattan, 2020). From broader research on social media and Instagram influencers, I was able to come up with a list of themes, as I did for my autoethnography, to develop understandings of ways social media influencers, particularly on Instagram, demonstrate attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture. These themes are: Totems, Selfies, and Relatability, Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity, Commodification of Self, and Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism. Chapter Six discusses how these are evident in the self-presentation of these influencers or similar.

The measures used for this research were a desktop computer provided by the University of Canterbury, my personal laptop, and my Apple iPhone 6. The data was collected at different times and locations from different devices, which illustrates the point that the New Age Californian Counterculture can be accessed from anywhere (Bareither and Bareither, 2019).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approaches I utilise throughout this thesis, providing the research questions, research paradigm, and research design. I have also outlined what an autoethnography is and why I chose this particular method as well as the advantages of this method. This chapter also discussed what constitutes a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques for this thesis, and a few advantages of this method.

Chapter Three: The New Age Californian Counterculture

Introduction

The popularisation of social media in the West has led to an increase in communication and human interaction being predominately online (Dijick, 2013; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). For example, in July 2020, the number of global social media users was 3.96 billion (Kemp, 2020). This thesis argues that for a significant number of Western social media users, social media has become in many ways a New Religious Movement, taking elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture and expressing them in new ways. To explain what is meant by this claim this chapter first defines explicit religion, implicit religion, and the New Age, before exploring a history of the New Age Californian Counterculture from the 1960s to contemporary society. In the section on the 1960s, I discuss the rise of the Counterculture: The Beats, Carlos Castaneda, Self-Spirituality in Community: Findhorn Foundation and Esalen Institute, and The Human Potential Movement (HPM). In the section on the 1970s, I discuss Erhard Training Seminars (EST), Doctor (Dr.) Schucman's *A Course in Miracles*, and The Aquarian Age. In the section on the 1980s, I discuss Marilyn Ferguson – *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Shirley MacLaine, and Sheilaism, and in the 1990s – Contemporary Society section, I discuss *The Celestine Prophecy* and Mind, Body, Spirit. Following this history, I present the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture that provides a framework for an analysis of Instagram Influencers in Chapter Six and is also used to compare and contrast my own social media use with.

Religion: Explicit, Implicit, New Age, and New Age Californian Counterculture

This section provides the definitions of explicit religions, implicit religions, the New Age, and the New Age Californian Counterculture I use throughout this thesis.

Defining 'Religion'

The word 'religion' is derived from both 'religare' meaning to bind together and 'relegere' meaning to re-read and "etymologically speaking religion entails a process of reconnecting by worship a missing or broken intimacy between God and worshippers" (Mustafi, 2019, p. 119). There is no overarching scholarly consensus on the definition of religion, with the origins being ambiguous (Miller, 2016). However, the Oxford English Dictionary (2020) has four main definitions of religion that I draw on throughout this thesis. These are:

1. "A state of life bound by religious vows; the condition of belonging to a religious order."
2. "Christian Church."
3. "Action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods, or similar superhuman power; the performance of religious rites or observances."
4. "A particular system of faith and worship."

Examples of explicit religious groups include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, with many branches within each. Such groups are explicit religions because they usually adhere to a specific system of worship and faith, are institutionalised, and follow a formally organised doctrine (Sherwood, 2018).

'Implicit' Religions

Implicit religions, as with explicit religions, are also present in contemporary society. These, according to Bailey (2012), are a theory of the secular religions that can be found in everyday life or culture. Implicit religions are those outside the boundaries of traditional faith-based institutions, which provide a structure for analysing beliefs, ideas, myths, and ways of behaving (Parna, 2010). Lord (2006, p.206) claims that implicit religion has “phenomenological and heuristic characteristics” with “the mode of behaviour exhibited” as the defining factor rather than “the goal towards which the behaviour is directed.” This means that they can be individual-based religions that allow people to discover ideas, beliefs, or things for themselves, rather than rely on others to tell them what to believe in, what to do, and in turn, find their own journey of self-discovery.⁴

⁴ Some examples of implicit religions are New Religious Movements (NRMs). NRMs is an umbrella label covering a multitude of global spiritual phenomena that have materialised since the 1950s Cold War era and 1960s counterculture that exist autonomously outside of explicit religions. Some examples of NRMs are The Church of All Worlds (CAW), The Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM)/Pastafarianism, Jediism, and UFO Religions (Oliver, 2012; Cusack, 2016; Possamai, 2012; Taira, 2013; Jindra, 2003). The Church of All Worlds (CAW) is a NRM based on the rituals and beliefs of the fictional Church of All Worlds in the book *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) written by Robert A. Heinlein (Cusack, 2016). The Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM)/Pastafarianism began as a hoax-religion founded by American activist Bobby Henderson (1980 -) in 2005. Henderson fabricated Pastafarianism in an open letter to the Kansas State Board of Education, US as a response to intelligent design (a pseudoscientific claim of God) implemented as an alternative to human evolution taught in public schools. Following this, Pastafarianism became an internet phenomenon and many people affirm this belief system by worshipping the FSM (Obadia, 2015). Jediism is a NRM based on the Jedi in the popular culture phenomenon *Star Wars*. It became recognised as an official religion in 2001, when a number of residents in English speaking countries such as New Zealand and Australia recorded their religion as ‘Jedi’ on the national censuses (Possamai, 2012; Taira, 2013). UFO Religions are NRMs that adhere to the belief Extra Terrestrials (aliens) who operate under UFOs (unidentified flying objects) are interested in the welfare of humanity. This NRM specifically arose out of tensions from the Cold War era, in relation to nuclear conflicts between the East and West (Partridge, 2004).

Defining the New Age

Defining the New Age has been challenging for many scholars, as its highly eclectic structure means that the interpretations of scholars will differ. The New Age is often deemed a 'movement,' 'self-spirituality' (Heelas, 1996), 'religion' (Hanegraaff, 2000), a literal sense of a New Age coming (Melton, 1988), a 'smorgasbord' (Frisk, 2007), or a global spiritual marketplace (Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013).

The New Age is said to have come out of the Enlightenment⁵ and Romantic Eras⁶ when the search for non-institutional based religions began (Hanegraaff, 1996). The beginnings of the New Age were a reaction against the domination of scientific thought and a time of longing for self-transformation through consumerism as well as seeking alternative spiritualities. Self-transformations and fulfilment were often condemned in traditional

⁵ The Enlightenment Era was composed of a collection of ideas that dominated European thought from the late 17th century and most of the 18th century. People began to favour science, reason, and rationality over religious thought and wanted to free man from societal prejudices and authority (Crocker, 1969). There were many determinants that influenced the Enlightenment, such as the Scientific Revolution, advancements in technology, and the *Philosophies* (Love, 2008). One influential scientist during the Scientific Revolution was Sir Isaac Newton (1642 – 1727) who theorised how gravity worked in his book *Principia Mathematica*. If Newtonian law could claim the theory of gravity via reason, then the laws, which governed society, could also be founded through reason (Ibid). New understandings regarding electricity, mathematics, chemistry, magnetism, medicine, and advancements in technology such as the inventions of the barometer, thermometer, and microscope, led to people thinking about the world in new and alternative ways (Kuhn, 1976). The *Philosophies* were a collection of writers that contributed to the *Encyclopedié* – a general Encyclopedia published in France during the 18th century (Darnton, 1979). For the majority of the time, these writers were in conflict with one another, but all had one common goal of furthering the ideas of the Enlightenment through religious tolerance, a conviction that human life could be improved through improving society, and that those enlightened should influence the ones that govern (Crocker, 1969). Many people believed that the government, science, economic policy, and moral values needed to be freed from Christian authority, with Kant arguing that this period was about giving agency to people to move away from tutelage; to move away from the authority and projection of churches, governments, and other institutions. By moving away from tutelage, Kant believed it would allow freedom of speech (Crocker, 1969; Kant, 1784). Power and confidence were placed on common sense and reason over the power of Christian authority (Love, 2008).

⁶ At the beginning of the 19th century, in response to the Enlightenment arose the Romantic Movement – a movement that focused on an individual's thoughts, feelings, and subjectivity. It was where thought moved from rationality and reason into a new appreciation of nature – a philosophical vision that embraced elements of the divine, natural, human, will, emotion, as well as spirituality (Bebbington, 1990; Clements, 1987).

Christianity as selfish and immoral (Bloom, 2007; Campbell, 1987). In contrast, the New Age offered fulfilment and self-transformations, especially through consumerism (Ibid).

The New Age also stems from the rise of Pietism in 18th century Germany and the merging of the ideas from both the Eastern and Western parts of the world. Pietism is an individualistic religion based on Christian thought and a reaction against what was regarded as lifeless orthodoxy in Protestantism (Clements, 1987). The origins of Pietism can be traced to the 17th century work of Philipp Spener (1635 – 1705) who wrote two books *Pia desideria* (1675) and *Allgemeine Gottesgelehrtheit* (1680) based on spiritual renewal and rebirth (Lindberg, 2008). Pietism arose due to people seeking an escape from formal theologies, that those with faith were being reduced to formal theologies, church orders, and doctrines. Pietism is about a revival of piety and holds genuine holiness and spirituality as more important than church order (Strom, 2002). Many individuals turned to Pietism in the 18th century in the same way that many turn to the New Age when they are dissatisfied with the options currently available to them (Luckmann, 2003). The merging of the East and West started to occur in the 18th and 19th centuries, where ideas from the East such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Islam (Heelas, 1996) became better understood in the Western world. Alongside this was the rise of mysticism – having internal religious experiences often during alternative states of consciousness and a union with God or the absolute (Edsman, 1970) and occultism – knowledge of the hidden and paranormal (Henderson and Welsh, 1987).

Defining the New Age Californian Counterculture

For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to distinguish between the New Age and the New Age Californian Counterculture as the latter is what is reflected in social media. This emphasises the American influence on both the New Age Californian Counterculture and social media, as this thesis will show. The New Age Californian Counterculture definition I am using throughout this thesis is: A Western phenomenon stemming from the 1960s/1970s American counterculture that is made up of alternative beliefs and practices, a merging of Eastern and Western traditions, which rejects some of Western thought but not Western society. Many New Age Californian devotees create their own alternative realities, making it a personalised package of meaning that can be called a 'pick and mix' religion, where the devotee chooses aspects they like and discards the ones they do not (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). From here, I turn to the 1960s onwards to identify characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture used for analysis of Instagram influencers later in this thesis.

The 1960s

The New Age Californian Counterculture is an expansion of the 1960s/1970s American Counterculture, as more people in the West became increasingly aware of alternative spiritualities to traditional religions during this time (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Heelas, 1996).

The Rise of the Counterculture: The Beats, and Carlos Castaneda

The counterculture was a subculture where a participant's norms and behaviours differed from those of the mainstream, a type of rejection of Western society, and the advocating of social change (Costello, 1972). This was heavily influenced by 'The Beats' – a movement in the 1950s that began with the meeting of Jack Kerouac (1922 – 1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997), and William S. Burroughs (1914 – 1997) at Columbia University, New York in 1944 (Ibid). This eventuated into the establishment of a literary movement that gained significant global media attention (Prothero, 1991). The Beats' writings were social commentaries about American culture and politics in a Post-War era, with prominent works including Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), and Burrough's *Naked Lunch* (1959) (Jackson, 1988). These works contained explicit references to illicit drugs, sexual abuse, murder, and addiction, with the aim of the writers to reject standard narratives, separate themselves from mainstream society, and to combat censorship in the media (van Elteren, 1999).

The Beats movement was therefore also marked by a rejection of institutionalised religion and traditional Christian values, as well as a search for meaning through mystical experiences, hallucinogenic drugs, and Asian religions (van Elteren, 1999). The turn to Asian religions during 'The Beats' era was a result of a loss in faith in traditional Western religions

post World War II, a shift in cultural attitudes where writers became more open-minded about seeking inspiration, and many people wanting to find a sense of identity from the Eastern world (Jackson, 1988). The movement is thought to have produced some of the most important factors contributing to the Easternisation of the West (Ibid). This led to an upsurge in self-spirituality as well as the hippie counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s.

As well as this 'Eastern turn', there was also a turn in America and elsewhere to indigenous traditions as exemplified by the work of American author and anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1925 – 1998). Castaneda was important at this time as he wrote a series of books, beginning in 1968, about his supposed training in Shamanism – a practice aimed at reaching alternative states of consciousness (Castaneda, 2016; Braga, 2010). Castaneda was meant to study the Yaqui Indian tribe – Uto-Aztecan speaking indigenous peoples of Mexico who live in the valley of Rio Yaqui, Sonora (Leza, 2015), but instead, he became immersed with their belief system. In his series of books about Shamanism, he disclosed his claimed metaphysical experiences under the guidance of a Yaqui named Don Juan Matus (Castaneda, 2016). It has been debated whether this Yaqui exists, due to Castaneda's experiments with psychedelics, however, Castaneda was still considered heavily influential for the New Age Californian Counterculture because he inspired many people to experiment with reaching alternative states of consciousness (Braga, 2010). Throughout Castaneda's life he claimed to be able to connect with coyotes, that he could turn into a crow and also learned how to fly which he deemed a 'separate reality' to the one he lived, suggesting that he was attempting to create his own alternative reality (Marshall, 2007). This attempt to create his own alternative reality is similar to what I suggest some Instagram influencers are doing so in Chapter Six of this thesis.

Self-Spirituality in Community: Findhorn Foundation and Esalen Institute

As well as many individual alternative realities in the New Age Californian Counterculture, there was also the emergence of New Age Californian communities. Two examples of such communities I discuss in this section are Findhorn Foundation and Esalen Institute (Heelas, 1996). The emergence of these communities highlights how the New Age Californian Counterculture is a global spiritual marketplace or ‘pick and mix’ religion (Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013; Aupers and Houtman, 2006), as there are many options available for individuals choosing the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Findhorn Foundation

Findhorn Foundation⁷ is a New Age Californian Counterculture community in Scotland that began when two individuals, Eileen and Peter Caddy were made redundant from a hotel they managed in 1962 (Sutcliffe, 2003). The most likely reason that the Caddy’s were made redundant, although not confirmed, was due to their claimed practice of telepathic contact⁸ with superhuman beings (Ibid). The Caddy family moved to a caravan beside the village of Findhorn near Inverness, Scotland (Ibid). Existing on unemployment benefits, the Caddy’s began a vegetable garden for survival, which turned out to be a huge success that attracted attention from outsiders; exposing a higher amount of people to the

⁷ I term Findhorn Foundation a New Age Californian Counterculture community because a lot of influence for this group was taken from American counterculture, especially when David Spangler arrived (Miller, 2017).

⁸ This claim of telepathic communication links back to the concept of spiritualism which was a movement that began during the 19th century, where people who labelled themselves as spiritualists said that spirits of the dead can, and do, communicate with the living (Prothero, 1993). The spiritualist movement began with the Fox family who claimed to hear “communicative raps” at their farmhouse in New York in 1848 (Pimple, 1995, p.76). The Fox family’s experience gained media attention around the world, and the Fox sisters gave public demonstrations of their talents. This led to a worldwide phenomenon of spiritualism, and others believing that they could do the same (Conliffe, 2016). However, it all turned out to be a hoax (Blitz, 2015) but the spiritualist movement still managed to live on, really taking off after WWII in response to the massive casualties that occurred. The movement was especially popular with women who had lost men close to them to gain closure (Jalland, 1996).

New Age Californian Counterculture (Ibid). Following this, the garden became a place for New Age countercultural networking and a small community where members participated in alternative spiritualities, arts and crafts, therapies and more gardening. Members believed that they received information and guidance through telepathic and meditational practices (Findhorn Foundation, n.d). The settlement began as a temporary solution to unemployment but soon became the creation of a new Eden, where they prepared for the impending New Age. Those at Findhorn believed that the New Age would be revealed in 1967 offering salvation for a “spiritual elect” (Sutcliffe, 2003, p.17). This is important because the New Age is based on the claim of the elect – that is, there are chosen ones for the new world to come (Heelas, 1996).

In 1967, Eileen Caddy (1917 – 2006) had a vision that a person called ‘David Spangler’ would come to live and work at Findhorn to help define and organise the community’s spiritual curriculum and help to further expand their network (Findhorn Foundation, n.d). This vision became significant because David Spangler arrived at Findhorn in 1970 after travelling there from America. Spangler (1945 -), known as one of the founding fathers of the New Age Californian Counterculture, stayed at Findhorn until 1973 and still has connections with them (Miller, 2017). Findhorn was also greatly influenced by Alice Bailey’s⁹ (1880 – 1949) prayer *The Great Invocation*; a new daily meditation practice for Findhorn was also created based on the use of this prayer after the terrorist attacks in

⁹ Alice Bailey was a Christian turned theosophist, with many influential writings such as her prayer *The Great Invocation* which she claimed was given to her in 1945 by a spiritual being (Bailey, 1945). Bailey and her husband were expelled from the *Theosophical Society* – a society to progress theosophy – due to many disagreements (Sutcliffe, 2003). Bailey went on to found the *Lucis Trust/Arcane School* in 1923 that promoted an ‘eschatological theosophy’ meaning a theosophy with an emphasis on the end of the world (Miller, 1995).

September of 2001 (Sutcliffe, 2003). The use of this prayer emphasises that the community at Findhorn Foundation is greatly influenced by American culture.

Currently, there are approximately 350 people who live in and around the Findhorn community. Most of the community are white, heterosexual, middle-class people aged between 30 and 45 (Findhorn Foundation, n.d). Findhorn's community is repopulating a certain demographic, which is seen via the most recent statistics from the Pew Research Center. In 2014, the most common age for identifying as part of the New Age was between 30 and 49 and is sitting at 43 percent compared to 33 percent of 18 – 29-year-olds (Pew Research Center, 2014). Generally, those at Findhorn are middle class, educated, and seeking spiritual transformations. Many of the people who go to Findhorn come from Northern Europe and the United States (US); however, the demographic has slowly been shifting into a more diverse range of people from places such as Eastern Europe, Japan, and Brazil. Due to its popularisation and the hippie counterculture, the belief system deviated from a post-apocalyptic utopia into having worldly goals of healing, such as egalitarian cooperation and self-realisation/self-actualisation (Clarke, 2004). This community revolves around a core group of colony elders, who oversee the infrastructure and decisions of Findhorn. The culture of the community is based on "the expression of emotion, bodily contact and self-reflexivity in speech and action: meditation, prayer, communing with nature, and studying various New Age texts" (Clarke, 2004, p.210). Findhorn Foundation is a community that links to the argument in this thesis that social media is a New Religious Movement that reflects elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture. The parallels between Findhorn as a community and social media is that they both enable the fundamental need of community and connection, while simultaneously allowing a culture of

individualism to occur, as well as encouraging members to find their ideal self (Clarke, 2004; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Isaranon, 2019; Fox et al., 2017; Brems et al., 2017).

Esalen Institute

Another New Age Californian Counterculture community that emerged in the 1960s was Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Esalen Institute was also established in 1962, by Michael Murphy (1930 -) and Dick Price (1930 – 1985). Price had joined the Air Force after graduating from college but was hospitalised due to a psychotic episode. His parents placed him in a private institution against his will for a year, having to undergo insulin shock and electroshock treatments. After this, Price decided to go experience East West House in San Francisco - a place where people could develop, improve, and transform themselves for the better, through activities such as yoga, meditation, and self-help sessions (Esalen, n.d). These activities are important for the New Age Californian Counterculture as they highlight individualism, personal development, and self-improvement (O’Neil, 2001). Price met Murphy in East West House, who suggested in 1961 that they could save money by moving into his family’s vacation house in Big Sur, where they could live rent-free, find part-time work, and find like-minded others who would share their interests in psychology and spirituality. Here, Murphy and Price would go on to create a community where they could claim to enable human potentialities. This is a term taken from Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963) about advancing the human mind through drugs and taking ideas from both the Eastern and Western parts of the world (Beauchamp, 1990). After speaking to Huxley, philosopher Alan Watts (1915 – 1973) - who popularised Eastern philosophy in the West, and University Professor Frederic Spiegelberg (1897 – 1994) who taught on Asian religions, Murphy and

Price decided to start a small weekend retreat that eventually turned into Esalen (Harvey and Blum, 2012; Kabil, 2012).

Many seminars were held at Esalen and gained significant attraction from those interested in spirituality, especially those travelling for spiritual meaning (spiritual seekers following the path of self-discovery), rather than those travelling to Californian to visit tourist attractions (Goldman, 2012). These seminars were based on humanistic psychology, human potential, and self-discovery (Irish, 1984). This materialised at a time when people were referring to American culture as an 'air conditioned nightmare', as author Henry Miller suggested 17 years prior (Miller, 1945). This reference to Miller's text was when the rise of such issues as racism, backyard bomb shelters, and McCarthyism resulted in the Civil Rights Movement, questioning of gender roles, psychedelia, creative explosions of popular culture, and a newfound fascination with Asian religions because of tensions between the East and the West such as nuclear conflict, the Cold War era, and rising distrust in authority (Kripal, 2017; Calonne, 2014). Henry Miller also predicted that there would be a desire for paradise in Big Sur, California where he resided, in his 1957 memoir, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, which can be viewed as a foreshadowing of the hippie counterculture of the 1960s (Miller, 1957; Calonne, 2014).

Esalen's fame grew exponentially throughout the 1960s, becoming a place for Dionysian explorations¹⁰ of the self through meditation, psychedelic drugs, yoga, and massage (Wood, 2008). Through such activities, the individual is enabled to find themselves,

¹⁰ Nietzsche uses Apollonian and Dionysian to represent the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus as a dichotomy. Apollo represents individuation, harmony, and progress, and Dionysus represents chaos, disorder emotion, intoxication, and unity. In Dionysian state, social norms, personal identity, and rational thought are not apparent and to achieve self-actualisation is through intoxication (such as consuming alcohol and/or drugs) (Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, 1999).

the God within, whilst promoting positive thought, self-improvement, and self-esteem.

Those at Esalen are usually striving to find self-actualisation¹¹ (Maslow, 1943). It is here we can see a link to the HPM, discussed next.

Human Potential Movement (HPM)

The Human Potential Movement (HPM) began when people started to gain interest in humanistic psychology.¹² Psychologists Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987) and Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970) were two main influencers of this movement. The HPM came about during the 1960s counterculture as a rebellion against explicit religions and mainstream psychology when people believed they could tap into something ‘other’, with many wanting to achieve alternative states of being so they could reach their full potential (Ryback, 2011; Bohart and Greening, 2001).¹³

The HPM is based on Maslow’s self-actualisation theory, taken from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs – a pyramid list of human wants, needs, and desires, with self-actualisation at the top (McLeod, 2018; Maslow, 1943). The central teaching of the HPM is that even if all a person’s basic needs as human are being met and are satisfactory, humans may expect that a new vexation will occur, for example, “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This we may call self-actualization” (Maslow, 1943, p.382). Self-actualisation is

¹¹ A term borrowed from Abraham Maslow, where people are able to get the best they possibly can out of themselves (Maslow, 1943).

¹² Humanistic psychology is a holistic approach enabling people to become more self-aware and emphasises the human drives to reach self-actualisation (Rogers, 1943).

¹³ The term ‘human potential movement’ was coined by George Leonard (1923 – 2010) and used to describe the work at Esalen during the 1960s (Amiras, 2008) and the HPM gain significant media attention when articles were written on Esalen and their HPM techniques in magazines such as *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Look* magazine (Kripal, 2017).

about self-fulfilment, and a desire to become more and more of what one is, becoming capable of absolutely everything that one is capable of (Maslow, 1943).

Carl Rogers also influenced the HPM. He agreed with Maslow's self-actualisation theory but expanded on it by adding the idea that for a person to grow they need to be in an environment that provides them with genuineness, acceptance, and empathy. If a person does not receive these three things, then they may not be able to reach self-actualisation (Rogers, 1974). Rogers's notion of the self or self-concept is about who someone is as a person, who they are on the inside, which is influenced by a person's experience and their interpretations of those experiences. The social context a person finds themselves in is also important to how they perceive themselves and the world around them. Rogers believed that people want to behave, feel, and experience things that are consistent with how they want to portray their self-image. If people find themselves close to the ideal version of themselves, then they will likely have a higher sense of self-worth (Ibid). This connects to social media being reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture as many platforms encourage users to perform their ideal self (Isaranon, 2019; Fox et al., 2017; Brems et al., 2017). Many HPM techniques have been utilised in psychology, psychotherapy, prison reform, business, and medicine, and have influenced the New Age Californian Counterculture especially its central claim being that when one reaches their full potential, it will help bring about social change (Starcher and Allen, 2016).

The 1970s

The moral panic created by the murders of celebrities Sharon Tate and Rosemary and Leno LaBianca, killed by some of Charles Manson's (1934 – 2017) followers from his commune *The Family*,¹⁴ in August, 1969 led to the collapse of the commune movement (Atchison and Heide, 2011). The followers Susan Atkins, Tex Watson, and Patricia Krenwinkel carried out these murders (Zoglin, 1994). This case and its sensationalism in the media meant that people no longer saw hippie¹⁵ communes and the counterculture as places of utopia; they now were associated with violence and crime (Atchison and Heide, 2011). This led to a drop in the counterculture and many people began turning to alternative versions of self-spirituality such as the New Age Californian Counterculture (Heelas, 1996). Many hippies also become middle-class yuppies (young, urban, and upwardly mobile professionals) who left the counterculture in pursuit of financial gain (Perkins, 1991). As many hippies became yuppies, this highlights that they were favouring

¹⁴ *The Family/The Manson Family* was a commune in California led by the "charismatic" Charles Manson in the late 1960s (Serratore, 2019). Manson was born in Ohio in 1934; where his mother allegedly sold him to another woman wanting children in exchange for some beer and after this, his uncle was sent to find him to get him back (Norman, 2019). Manson was then fostered to another loving home and spent many of his school years in reform school. From 1947 onwards, Manson spent most of his life in and out of jail (Ibid). In 1967, Manson was released from prison, discovered a passion for music, and an obsession with the band The Beatles. Then, he moved to California with the intention to pursue music, reinventing himself in the process to look like a "Christ-like guru" in Haight-Ashbury (Norman, 2019, p.28). Manson's quest for fame in the music industry failed, so he endeavoured to find his own band of followers, which he did from picking up hitchhikers (Norman, 2019). These hitchhikers consisted mainly of middle-class white women heading for the hippie communes in San Francisco and Los Angeles, who Manson used to convince men to join his group as well (Serratore, 2019). Manson convinced these followers that he was the second coming of Christ, encouraged them to experiment with LSD, and often lectured them on humanity, making it a commune, not just a band of followers (Norman, 2019). In 1969, Manson manipulated his followers into murdering people to cause what he termed "Helter Skelter" after The Beatles song that would cause a race war and turn him into the leader of the world (Dubrow-Marshall and Dubrow-Marshall, 2017). Manson thought this race war would occur based on The Beatles album "The White Album" containing the song "Helter Skelter" released in 1968 (Atchison and Heide, 2011).

¹⁵ Hippies were members of the 1960s/1970s counterculture, who wanted to explore alternative states of consciousness through drugs, create their own communities/communes, be part of the sexual revolution, and often listened to psychedelic music and are usually associated with freedom, peace, and socialism (Scott, 2017).

capitalism over socialism¹⁶ (Pekala, 2001). The New Age Californian Counterculture had changed from its early stages of being “other-worldly” into a celebration of “this-worldly” practices and beliefs (Sutcliffe, 2003, p.7). This section discusses the 1970s era of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Erhard Seminar Training (EST)

A seminar called Erhard Seminar Training (EST) was created in 1971 by John Paul Rosenberg (1935 -) (Chryssides, 2011). Rosenberg changed his name to Werner H. Erhard after abandoning his family, sourcing his new name from articles in *Esquire* magazine, where he read about a German economics minister Ludwig Erhard and physicist Werner Heisenberg (Haldeman, 2015). EST was created so that Erhard could merge Asian philosophy and Scientology¹⁷ to offer self-enlightenment and global transformation (Laycock, 2014). EST stemmed from an epiphany Erhard claimed he had while driving over the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco when he realised life was meaningless. It has been suggested that the symbolism of the bridge reflects that he was experiencing inner change. Once this feeling of emptiness went away, Erhard realised he was free and was overcome with the need to share this with others, so he created the EST experience (Chryssides, 2011; Laycock, 2014). EST is designed to gain effective instructional control over the trainees

¹⁶ Many people turned to the counterculture of the 1960s, as they wanted socialist values, a utopia/paradise and equality. Hippies who became yuppies favoured capitalism over socialism because financial gain allowed them to do what they wanted to do (Perkins, 1991; Kaufman, 1991).

¹⁷ Scientology is a religion invented by American author L. Ron Hubbard (1911 – 1986) who created the therapy movement Dianetics, which is an intrusive technique to rid the mind of psychological disorders and fears that are claimed to be irrational (Lewis, 2009). To join the Church of Scientology, potential members have to go through both an auditing process (counselling) and training (where the member can realise the full potential of their mind, based on bringing up painful and triggering memories) (Ibid). The doctrine of Scientology is that humans are immortal spiritual beings known as thetans brought to earth millions of years ago by a dictator being called Xenu (Pentikainen and Pentikainen, 1996). Scientology parallels pyramid schemes because for each member to gain more or new knowledge, then they must pay to do so (West, 1990). It is also considered an official religion in the USA (Lewis, 2009).

through the trainer; use this gained control to give trainees increased awareness of their personal and inner experience, mistrust towards their own knowledge, and complete trust in this new experience; and leave each trainee to explore, examine, trust and use personal experiences to service goals or problems they may encounter (Baer and Stolz, 1978). This suggests that EST is about a person accepting that the individual is the cause of their experiences, rather than the product of his or her own experiences.¹⁸ Other examples of EST instructional control include the trainees being ridiculed by being told their thoughts are not true and often being made to sit in a cold room for 15 hours at a time without being allowed to leave¹⁹ (Baer and Stolz, 1978). Such seminars can often convince people that important things are not important, such as vaccinations (McKeever and McKeever, 2019).²⁰ As well as EST being one way people to explore alternative states of mind and realise their full potential, many others turned to New Age Californian Counterculture texts such as *A Course in Miracles* discussed next.

Dr. Schucman's A Course in Miracles

A Course in Miracles (1975) was written by Dr. Helen Schucman (1909 – 1981) and arose out of the spiritualist movement (Schucman and Thetford, 1996). It was presented as

¹⁸ Erhard's seminars were also particularly controversial due to the conditions participants were subjected to.

¹⁹ Baer and Stolz (1978, p.59) suggest that EST training parallels "brainwashing" which they describe as "induction of pain and fear," "punishment of previous repertoire," "invalidation of personal status," "stripping of self-defense techniques," and "reinforcement of a specific pattern of new behaviour." Although I do not suggest in this thesis that the New Age Californian Counterculture brainwashes people into joining, EST seminars are important for the New Age Californian Counterculture because they are one way that people could experiment with self-religiosity and alternative states of consciousness (Heelas, 1993; Baer and Stolz, 1978).

²⁰ This links into the 'anti-vaxxer' movement, where people refuse to have vaccinations or vaccinate their children. Many anti-vaxxers gain their information from skewed online facts, such as vaccines causing Autism, which are posted on social media, and then on mainstream news sources. As many people take mainstream news sources as factual, some people take anti-vaxxer theories as factual if they see them on social media (McKeever and McKeever, 2019). Many anti-vaxxers are part of the New Age Californian Counterculture as they often turn to alternative healing methods over scientific methods (Rich, 2019; Araujo, 2020).

a type of New Age Californian Countercultural mysticism, where Schucman claimed her text was the result of being channelled by Jesus. The book is referred to as a course and was originally split into three parts, then later merged together. The first is *The Text*, followed by *The Workbook* for students, and completed by *The Manual* for teachers. This book aims to train the reader's mind into thinking about reality differently, claiming that the world should not be understood in a traditional Christian sense, but as being healed through a "correct perception of the world" (Clarke, 2004, p.1). Clarke's quote suggests that people in their current world should think about their world differently in order to create an alternative reality and gain their own subjective meaning.

The Aquarian Age

Two ideas characterising the New Age Californian Counterculture in the 1970s were the shift from the older Christian era into the arrival of a new Saviour and the Aquarian Age – where humanity was entering a new astrological age symbolised by Aquarius, a new era (Chryssides, 2007). The concept of the Age of Aquarius was brought to public attention in the hit Broadway musical *Hair*, which opened in 1968, New York. *Hair* tells the story of the politically motivated hippies living alternative lifestyles who were fighting against the government drafting people into the military service for the Vietnam War (1955 – 1975) (Zoglin and Goehner, 2008).²¹

The 1970s was also a time when David Spangler's importance for the New Age Californian Counterculture grew. By 1973, David Spangler had left Findhorn Foundation and moved back to the US to give lectures and seminars on self-spirituality in both the US and

²¹ The song Aquarius from the musical was also released as a single by the band The 5th Dimension in 1969, spending six weeks at number one on the US Billboard Hot 100 demonstrating the impact of this musical on popular culture (Breihan, 2018).

Canada, wrote articles for magazines such as *The Sun*, *New Times*, and *East-West Journal* (Sjoo, 1994), and founded the spiritual education community Lorian Association in 1973 (Lorian Associations, 2019 - 2020). After the two World Wars, many people thought that their society was broken due to war, racism, and poverty and that it needed to be transformed into something new; a place of peace and community. For this to occur, humans needed cosmic energy that would redirect to others to create an increasing population of Californian Counterculture New Agers (Spangler, 1976).²² Many of Spangler's ideas were taken from the worshipping of Christ where he believed Christ to be an embodiment of a cosmic being and that Christ should be a universal educator, which suggests a universal coming together of peoples (Spangler and McVicar, 1978).

²² Spangler wrote many New Age books during the 1970s such as, *Revelation: The Birth of the New Age* (1976), *Towards a Planetary Vision* (1977), *Reflections on the Christ* (1977), and *Emergence: The Rebirth of the Sacred* (1984) (Kyle, 1995).

The 1980s

Throughout the 1980s, the New Age Californian Counterculture began to shift into more of an individualistic counterculture, where people could create their own personalised package of meaning. This was because Western society started to place more emphasis and value on individualism with the rise of neoliberalism (Wilson, 2017). Neoliberalism is a policy that favours free-market capitalism and a “motivated shift away from public-collective values to private-individualistic-values” (Barnett, 2005, p.8). In the 1980s, neoliberalism was the term used to describe both the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher’s term as the prime minister of the United Kingdom (Prasad, 2012; Barnett, 2005). This section discusses the 1980s era of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Marilyn Ferguson – The Aquarian Conspiracy

Marilyn Ferguson (1938 -2008) was best known for her New Age Californian Counterculture text *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) which was often referred to as the bible/handbook of the New Age Californian Counterculture (Kyle, 1995). This is similar to how I claim that in contemporary society the smartphone can be labelled a New Age Californian Counterculture bible/sacred text substitute, as it is a device that is carried around constantly and almost everywhere by many people. Ferguson (1981) claimed that there was a paradigm shift²³ in society, a new worldview where many people wanted to challenge the mainstream goals of society. The New Age Californian Counterculture enabled those who claimed to have had spiritual or transcendental experiences to explain and share their knowledge with others; *The Aquarian Age* made those who wanted to share this

²³ Ferguson borrowed the term ‘paradigm shift’ from philosopher Thomas Kuhn, meaning that there is a fundamental change regarding scientific discipline in society (Kuhn, 1962).

knowledge more comfortable in doing so. This new way of sharing quickly seeped into popular culture as certain sectors of the public were already interested in alternative states of consciousness and seeking spiritual meaning with the HPM (Kyle, 1995).

Shirley MacLaine

Shirley MacLaine (1934 -) is a Hollywood actress and author best known for her books, *Don't Fall off the Mountain* (1970) and *You Can Get There From Here* (1975), however, it was not until her 1983 book, *Out on a Limb*, she began using New Age Californian terminology. From here, MacLaine began her journey to find her spiritual self and a connection between mind, body, and spirit, which holistically emphasises that everything is, interconnected (York, 1995). *Out on a Limb* is about MacLaine's journey towards self-discovery in an attempt to find purpose and meaning at a time where she was filled with anxiety. MacLaine was having an affair that was causing her to feel this way and wanted to know why she seemingly pushed all the men away in her life. She travelled to Peru with her friend David where she realised that she must share her spiritual views with the world (Urban, 2015). MacLaine's main New Age Californian Countercultural teaching was that the self is sacred, and people worship the self as if they are their own God. Everyone is their own God, their own moral compass. This is so society can achieve a happier, healthier world (Burrows, 1986).

Sheilaism

The concept of 'Sheilaism' was coined in 1985, borrowed from Sheila Larson after Bellah et al. (1985) interviewed over 200 Americans about where they found meaning in American culture. For many, it was through religion, often finding religion within the self. One participant, Sheila, stated that her own religion was about taking care of one another,

being gentle with oneself and others, and loving oneself, as that is what she believed God would want people to do. On two occasions, Sheila experienced God speaking to her, but in reality, it was her own voice speaking to her, making herself her own God. In relation to the New Age Californian Counterculture, the self is what is worshipped, meaning that there is no specific God that communicates but rather that people turn inwards, towards the self, for guidance. The first occasion occurred before she had to undergo surgery where she felt God tell her all would be okay and the second occurred when she was nursing a dying woman and had to deal with a husband unable to handle the situation. During this, Sheila believed that if she were to look in the mirror, she would see Christ (Ibid). Grimshaw (2013) expands on the concept of 'Sheilas' – individuals who are searching for their own personal religion – and suggests this often occurs through spiritual tourism:

spirituality and spiritual tourism are focused, one could say centred, upon the self and maintenance of the self as an autonomous individual who maintains the self as acts of consumption outside everyday time – (Grimshaw, 2013, p.548).

This means that by seeking an individual personalised religion, people may become preoccupied with the self, often doing things to enhance the self. This is integral to the New Age Californian Counterculture as it is about finding the divine within the self, the divine who can guide oneself (Heelas, 1996).

The 1990s – Contemporary Society

By the 1990s, many scholars suggested that the New Age was no longer part of Western thought (Melton 2007; Hammer, 2010). Others disagreed, suggesting that the New Age was very much alive, just taking on new forms such as a continuation of the New Age Californian Counterculture. New Age Californian Counterculture alternative spiritualities were now viewed as a spiritual supermarket, a type of seeking, and resistance to hierarchical and formally organised institutions (Aupers and Houtman 2006; Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013). This section discusses the New Age Californian Counterculture era from the 1990s to contemporary society.

The Celestine Prophecy

The Celestine Prophecy (1993), a novel written by American author James Redfield (1950 -) is an important New Age Californian Counterculture text as it is claimed to be about spiritual and psychological ideas found in many ancient Eastern traditions and how people can connect to the divine. It follows an individual taking a spiritual journey through Peru, who starts to notice many instances of synchronicity – a term referring to the idea that coincidences have meaning attached to them. This means that coincidences are not just coincidences but something more. By focusing on synchronicities, humankind will be able to live in a permanent spiritual state, where humans can further develop themselves and interconnect with the nature of the universe (Redfield, 1993; Main, 2004). The impact of *The Celestine Prophecy* from the 1990s onwards has been that it has brought insights of New Age Californian Counterculture spirituality to many as it commentates on the changes of religion in contemporary society (Hanegraaff, 2000). In addition many readers of this book claim they feel understood (Ibid).

Mind, Body, Spirit

By the 2000s, the New Age Californian Counterculture had turned into a 'mind, body, spirit' outlook which is shown among texts such as *The Secret* (2006) – a self-help book and film written by Australian author Rhonda Byrne (1945 -) about the power of positive thinking. This is the belief that if a person focuses their attention on wanting something so much, just by constantly thinking about it, then the things the person desires will manifest (Shermer, 2007). This idea is derived from American author Dale Carnegie's (1888 – 1955) book, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (1948), another self-help book about how to stop worrying, be happy, and gain psychological capital.²⁴ In addition, there has been an increase in the popularity of self-spirituality, which is evident among crystal shops, alternative modes of healing, tarot cards, and horoscopes (Siemans, 2018).

²⁴ Psychological capital is the state of an individual who has high optimism, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Hayek et al., 2012).

New Age Californian Counterculture Characteristics

As the New Age manifests in different ways in different periods, it is still possible to identify many significant characteristics of what I am terming the New Age Californian Counterculture. These characteristics are discussed in this section and provide a framework for the textual analysis of Instagram influencers in Chapter Six.

Pick and Mix

The New Age Californian Counterculture is an individualised/personalised ‘pick and mix’ religion, where it takes aspects from many different religions and spiritualities (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). *The Invisible Religion* is a term coined by Thomas Luckmann, which refers to the many individuals who seek alternative religious beliefs rather than traditional religious beliefs, with many people constructing their own subjective personalised packages of meaning. This shows that religion is important to humanity but is something that should never be ultimately defined as only or just church-going behaviour (Luckmann, 1967). Here, the New Age Californian Counterculture links to globalism/globalisation, as it is a coming together of many religions and many spiritualities that can be accessed from anywhere in the world (Turner, 2006). The New Age Californian Counterculture also ties into imperialism as the thinkers in the Western world blend Eastern traditions with their own, often controlling what they want them to be (Heelas, 1996). Through the New Age Californian Counterculture being a ‘pick and mix’ religion, an individual can claim their own truth – a subjective concept that anyone can find no matter their context (Latham, 2004). To expand on this concept is to consider universalism, which means that otherness is insignificant where anyone can participate in the New Age Californian Counterculture (Beck and Camiller, 2004). Universalism is derived from Christianity, as much as Western society’s morals and

laws have been, and allows for individuals, no matter their class, ethnicity, economic, or political status to participate in their own individualised religion (McKanan, 2013).

Millennialism, The Sacred Self, and Post-Protestantism

Much of the New Age Californian Counterculture is about millennialism, the belief that there will be a 'Golden Age' or 'Paradise' on earth prior to a final judgement day. This concept is based on the belief that the current world is flawed, and that humans deserve a better world that will be gained. Millennialism is not necessarily about the afterlife, but a more desirable life to come (Sutcliffe, 2003). This New Age Californian Counterculture version of the doctrine stems from the ideas of Alice Bailey, mentioned earlier, who advocated for a global universal religion through the teaching of Eastern and Western traditions that would allow for a new world to appear on earth (Bailey, 1994).

Another principle of the New Age Californian Counterculture is that many New Agers uphold the belief that the self itself is sacred and can be worshipped. A person's inner spirituality will lead to the foundation of a new world, where the key to moving everything that is wrong with this world into a world where everything is right, is achieved through self (Heelas, 1996). This idea stems from German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1768 – 1834) notion that true religion is found within, religion is a pre-reflexive feeling, part of the intuition, is rooted inside the human spirit, and is a by-product of human nature which drives people to do the things they do (Schleiermacher, 1996). This means that religion can be incarnate – embodied in human form (Hector, 2006) which is also another one of Shirley MacLaine's teachings, even though she does not reference Schleiermacher (Urban, 2015).

Heelas (1996, pp. 18 - 20) asserts that the New Age Californian Counterculture has three main teachings to do with self-spirituality: life is not what it should be through everyday experience; the New Age is a way to achieve perfection, and a way of achieving salvation. Through these teachings are three expressions: 'Your lives do not work', 'you are Gods and Goddesses in exile', and 'let go/drop it'. The first expression implies that some of those who participate in the New Age Californian Counterculture are dissatisfied with their lives and want to find a better one away from the constraints of mainstream society and culture (Green, 2011). The second expression indicates that perfection is not something that can be found via socialisation, but only by moving beyond the socialised self to find the ego. The ego in Sigmund Freud's (1856 – 1939) theory is the mediator between the id and superego, where the id is the subconscious instinct and the superego is the conscious morality (Freud, 1910). In the New Age Californian Counterculture, the ego is the driving force that allows one to find the higher, authentic self (Ivakhiv, 2003). The final expression refers to the idea that the 'ego' is a mediator that balances the id and superego (Freud, 1910). This is where Heelas (1996, p.20) suggests that the aim of self-spirituality is to "break on through to the other side"²⁵ in order to let go of the control of authority. From these three expressions, it is evident that the New Age Californian Counterculture is an unorganised system of worship and faith and often involves worshipping of the self rather

²⁵ This '*Break on Through (To The Other Side)*' was a song released in 1966 by *The Doors* – a band who took their name from English writer Aldous Huxley's book *The Doors of Perception* (1952) (Blazeski, 2017). This book was influential on the New Age counterculture of the 20th century as Huxley wrote about his experiences with the psychedelic 'mescaline.' Huxley wanted to explore alternative states of consciousness, usually achieved through psychedelics (Huxley, 1952). Huxley wanted to experience a 'holiday' from reality, to achieve spiritual connections with higher beings, and to break on through to the other side (Beauchamp, 1990). Wanting to achieve alternative states of consciousness was commonplace post WWII as many people were feeling dissatisfied with life, especially those who had lost people close to them in battle (Inglehart, 2000). This new era saw the rise of two superpowers, the US and Russia who suffered many tensions during the Cold War (1947 – 1991) (Zloblin, 2008). Many people wanted to escape reality – an idea that was discussed with the Human Potential Movement.

than participating in a formally organised doctrine. A central claim of the New Age Californian Counterculture is that when one experiences transcendence, they will find their ideal self. In comparison with other religions, the New Age Californian Counterculture is more about the individual and spiritual with less emphasis on the collective (Heelas and Houtman, 2009; Berger et al. 2001).²⁶

The New Age Californian Counterculture can also be presented as a type of Western Post-Protestant spirituality. Protestantism is a derivative of Christianity where Protestants reject much of the Catholic Church's doctrines, with Post-Protestantism focusing on individualism, self-righteousness, millennialism, and a sense of being chosen, but without any influence of the Catholic Church. Protestants see the Church as a channel for individual salvation, whereas the Catholic Church sees salvation as intrinsically social (Cohen and Hill, 2007). The New Age Californian Counterculture's emphasis on individualism, transcendence, ideal self, and millennialism shows that it is a type of Western Post-Protestant spirituality, a move away from traditional norms and values into a personalised package of meaning, or a global spiritual marketplace (Hodder, 2009; Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013).

²⁶ This means that the New Age Californian Counterculture has come under much scrutiny. For example, there have been many Christian critiques on the New Age Californian Counterculture, where the importance of the individual is placed before the importance of God and that it has too many preoccupations with Eastern traditions (Chryssides, 2007). To many Christians, this is often seen as dangerous with one prolific example being Frank E. Peretti's (1951 -) *The Present Darkness* (1986) book which critiques the New Age Californian Counterculture and Eastern spiritual practices by portraying meditation as a type of demonic possessions (Peretti, 1986). Other critiques suggest that because the New Age Californian Counterculture lacks a formal structure and is an unorganised entity, it becomes difficult to distinguish from New Religious Movements (NRMs) and New Social Movements (NSMs), often being deemed an ideology or worldview rather than something that actually exists, and is seen as too broad of a term with ideas that do not connect (Sutcliffe 2002; Carrette and King 2005).

Alternative, Divine Reality, and Identity

Heelas (1996) claims five additional characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture. These are: unmediated individualism, the self-ethic, self-responsibility and magical power, freedom, and, perennialism. Unmediated individualism refers to one's belief that they are their own authority, and it is only them, not something 'other', that makes them do the things they do. People are obligated to find their truth, giving them direct and pristine access to spiritual realms (Cullen, 2009; Heelas, 1996). The self-ethic refers to how New Agers turn to alternative practices, instead of traditional practices to find something that works for them. This is done by listening to the ego's voice of authority, with the self becoming one's own moral code (Cullen, 2009). Self-responsibility and magical power are concerned with the autonomy attached to the self. New Agers are responsible for their lives meaning that individuals act independently with no divine interventions, which fits in well with neoliberalism, as the individual is the one who makes the choices (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Freedom is about how people have the desire to be free in order to be human and understand themselves as a person (Heelas, 1996). Perennialism is where all the world's spiritualities share a common truth, with differences that grow out of this truth. This stems from Huxley's book *The Perennial Philosophy* (Huxley, 1947) which suggests that having gnosis is important for the New Ager to find their truth; their self (Bloom, 1993).

Tarcher (1988) specifies the New Age Californian Counterculture into four attributes: personal consciousness and the everyday world are part of a divine reality, there is a concealed higher, authentic self inside humans which is connected to the divine elements of the universe, this higher self can be accessed and used as a guide for the individual, and the access to the higher self is the purpose of human life. These attributes stem from the

modern discovery of Gnosticism, which, in Bloom's influential text, emerged in opposition to the 2nd century Christian Church where the Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created by a Demiurge,²⁷ and to achieve salvation one must have gnosis; knowledge (Bloom, 1993). This highlights that many New Agers draw upon gnosis as a form of individual progression through becoming more and more embodied in the cosmos (Rindfleish, 2005). As the New Age Californian Counterculture is an eclectic mix, not every New Ager will draw on this as it is up to the individuals themselves to decide what aspects of the New Age Counterculture they affirm (Heelas, 1996).

Sebald (1984) identifies the New Age Californian Counterculture as a movement for the following five reasons; it gives a sense of belonging, New Agers share common values, with one significant value being that the world needs fixing, there is a clear goal where New Agers have their own subjective personalised package of beliefs, the New Age has a common style with an emphasis on transcendence and anti-materialism, and New Agers heavily rely on mass communication technologies to broadcast information. This demonstrates that the benefits of the New Age Californian Counterculture are not dissimilar to the benefits gained from adhering to traditional religions. The New Age Californian Counterculture is *sui generis* (unique) but lacks legislation, historical consciousness, boundaries, and clear indicators as to what belonging, or membership are. It has no formal founder and no explicit identity (Sutcliffe, 2002). Rather, the New Age Californian Counterculture is an implicit social construction of identity where individuals are free to construct and choose their own personalised religion (Ibid). The New Age Californian

²⁷ A spiritual being responsible for controlling the material world but is lower ranking than a Supreme God (Mohr, 1985).

Counterculture is a secularised religion where those drawn to it are usually dissatisfied with aspects of Western thought and traditional religions, with those who participate in the counterculture agreeing that contemporary Western society can, and should, be different (Hanegraaff, 2000).

Finally, everything in the New Age Californian Counterculture is interconnected, which coincides with the globalisation of the internet as a technology that allows information, computers, and people to connect through network spheres. This demonstrates that the internet can be somewhere where the New Age Californian Counterculture can appear (Gustin, 2013).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has defined explicit religion, implicit religion, the New Age, and the New Age Californian Counterculture. I discussed a history of the New Age Californian Counterculture throughout the 1960s to contemporary society. This outlined how the New Age Californian Counterculture is recreated as society changes over time so that it can continue to exist. This thesis argues that a similar pattern of recreation can be seen with social media, in order to keep users interested as society shifts into newer trends. Finally, the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture were outlined, which will later be utilised for analysis of Instagram influencers.

Chapter Four: The Digital Canopy: Content, Community, and Connection

Introduction

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Twitter are just a few examples of social media platforms in contemporary society. Digital platforms encourage the importance of user-generated content, community, and connections (Dijck, 2013; Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020). Social media platforms enable users to create their own ritualistic behaviours, such as constantly checking Facebook messenger, scrolling Instagram for hours, sending daily Snaps to people on Snapchat, or tweeting updates about their lives on Twitter (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Cornelio and Roig, 2020). With an ever-increasing emphasis on individualism in Western society, the internet and social media can be labelled as a type of 'digital canopy' which people can use to give their lives meaning, especially in a nihilistic world. This occurs in a similar way that religion manifests to give meaning to humans in Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger, 1967). This chapter explores how contemporary society has developed into a digital canopy by discussing a brief history of communication technologies, the internet, and social media. The communication section explores the shift to Digital Technologies and Mobile Phone Technology, 1G – 5G Generations, and The Smartphone, the internet section explores Galactic Networking, The World Wide Web (WWW), and The Internet Evolutions: Web 1.0 – Web 4.0. The social media section explores early social media platforms (pre-2000s) and contemporary social media platforms (post-2000s) in two tables. Both tables show the platform, creators, years active, and a brief synopsis of each social media. Following each table, I discuss the social

media platforms most relevant to the New Age Californian Counterculture before considering the gender trends evident in social media users. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how social media is engaged within contemporary society, with further connections to the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Communication

This section gives an overview of the history of communication technologies that highlight the fundamental need for communication between people. This need for humans to share and communicate with one another began orally (Tannenbaum, 2000), with the diversity of languages being at least 100,000 years old (Nichols, 1992). Written communication began with cave paintings and petroglyphs in the Neolithic and Upper Palaeolithic ages (Straus, 1985), then came ideograms, writing, and finally, the creation of the alphabet (Besner and Coltheart, 1979). These early ways of communicating were the catalysts in a series of advancements that helped lead to the technologies we have today.

Advancements of technology led to the creation of printing technologies, which date back to 1040D. This was when the wooden block moveable type printing was invented (Hummel, 1944). In 1439, the printing press was introduced, which played a key role in the spread of information to the masses through print media (Rees, 2005). In 1844, the wood pulp papermaking process began which helped progress towards newsprint (Boganski, 2014). The spread of information to the masses is important for this thesis, as social media in contemporary society enables users to spread information instantly worldwide through a multitude of mediums but increasingly for many, either only or predominately all from one device, the smartphone (Anshari et al., 2016; Yuan and Wu, 2020; Krämer and Schäwel, 2020).

The development of telecommunication technology began in the 18th century, continuing to develop into the 19th century. Some examples include the telegraph line in 1792 (Martin, 2000), Morse code in the 1830s, the electric telegraph in the 1840s (Morse and Kloss, 1966), and the landline telephone in 1876 (Gorman and Carlson, 1990). The rise

of radio and television communications were subsequently developed throughout the 20th century (Meyers, 2013). These early developments in communication all helped lead to the eventual creation of computers, mobile phones, and consequently, the internet and social media. In contemporary society, social media is a mix of both print media and image-based media translated online (Liu, Dzyabura, and Mizik, 2020).

Digital Technologies

Computer technology production began in the 19th century, but it was not until 1937 when Alan Turing (1912 – 1954) conceptualised the modern computer – a computer that was capable of absolutely anything when given programmable instruction (Turing, 1937). By the 1950s, digital computers had materialised (Solli and Jalai, 2015). These digital computers were still bulky, impractical, and took up lots of space, so it was not until the creation of light portable devices that there was a real shift in digital technology towards portability (Ibid). The 1950s was also the decade where the material used for semiconductor transistors changed from germanium (Ge) into silicon (Si). This occurred in the area labelled ‘Silicon Valley’. Silicon Valley,²⁸ located in the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California, is home to many high technologies, innovation, and social media companies (Pillarisetty, 2011). Silicon Valley is important for this thesis because it is the place of origin for the majority of social media platform companies (Ibid). I consider some of these platforms as reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture, which emerged concurrently with the rise of Silicon Valley (Aupers and Houtman, 2006).

²⁸ In 1971, American journalist Dan Hoefler (1922 – 1986) coined the term ‘Silicon Valley’ in reference to the many semiconductor start-up companies in California (Basset, 2002).

The American physicist William Shockley Jr. (1910 – 1989) founded the first Silicon Valley high-technology company ‘Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory’ in 1956, where he made transistors out of silicon. Shockley Jr. abandoned his project in 1957, with eight of his employees starting a new company ‘Fairchild Semiconductor’ (Rosenberg, 2017; Goffee and Jones, 2007). With growing interest in the creation of silicon semiconductors, two engineers from the research company ‘Bell Labs’, Mohamed Atalla (1924 – 2009), and Dawon Kahng (1931 – 1992), invented the MOSFET (metal-oxide-silicon-transistor). MOSFETS allowed computer/digital technologies to become smaller and smaller (Pillarisetty, 2011). Atalla went on to join information-technology company ‘Hewlett-Packard’ (HP) in 1961 where MOSFETS were mass-produced. Kahng and Atalla are both credited with starting California’s silicon revolution and the Digital Revolution²⁹ from the 1950s – 1970s (Bassett, 2002). In 1970, the first desktop computer was released and by 1977, personal home computers were commercialised meaning they were marketed to everyday people (Sims, 2015). A shift to portable devices such as the laptop, iPad, smartphone, and tablet occurred from the turn of the 21st century, emphasising the function of the Western world’s constantly ‘on-the-go’ society where there was increasing demand for portable and all-in-one devices that did not take up heaps of space (Reid, 2018).

Mobile Phone Technology, 1G – 5G Generations, and The Smartphone

Originally, mobile phone technologies were installations in vehicles that allowed people such as taxi drivers and emergency services to communicate, similar to walkie-talkies in the 20th century (Linge and Sutton, 2016). It was not until 1973 when the first handheld cellular mobile phone was invented, by two Motorola employees, John F. Mitchell (1928 –

²⁹ This revolution was a shift from analogue technologies into digital technologies (Bassett, 2002).

2009) and Martin Cooper (1928 -) (Farley, 2005). These eventually developed into smartphones that we know of in today's society (Verduyn et al., 2020).

Mobile phone technology has been split into waves of generations, from 1G – 5G. 1G systems used analogue networks in the 1980s, 2G systems used digital networks in the 1990s and popularised prepaid mobile phones in the West (Shukla et al., 2013). With 2G, there was a demand from mobile users to be able to browse the internet on their phones, leading to the creation of 3G in the early 2000s (Hossain, 2013). Then, further demand led the 3G network into being overwhelmed by customers streaming media content that forced the 4G Native IP networks to emerge in 2009. 4G networks relied on packet switching³⁰ instead of LAN, WAN, or internet networks (Shukla et al., 2013). The current generation is 5G, which is a technology, designed to increase the speed and responsiveness of wireless networks dramatically, which began in 2018 and is currently being spread globally (Hui et al., 2020).

The important class of mobile phone technology for this thesis is the smartphone.³¹ This is because I consider the smartphone as a type of New Age Californian Counterculture bible/sacred text substitute. While, the New Age Californian Counterculture does not have a bible specifically, but rather a varied and fluid number of texts, discussed in Chapter Three that people draw on, my argument here is that the smartphone acts as a bible/sacred text in a similar way evangelical Christians such as Protestants carry around their bible wherever they go (Watt, 2020). The bible is often used as a guide and as a way to access one's own

³⁰ Packet switching theory refers to grouping data that is transmitted over a digital network into packets allowing for the same data path to be accessed by many users (Kleinrock and Lam, 1975)

³¹ Smartphones have the same features that mobile phones do; however, smartphones have stronger hardware and software allowing them to function more like a personal minicomputer (BinDhim and Trevena, 2015). Some examples of contemporary smartphone brands are the Apple IOS iPhones and android series such as Samsung, Huawei, and Oppo phones (Shi et al., 2018).

religion. Carrying it around everywhere means that Protestants always have access to their religion if they want or need it (Ibid). In the new religion of social media that reflects the New Age Californian Counterculture, the smartphone gives its users constant universal access to social media and technologies to connect with the world, create alternative realities, and experiment with representations of self to reach self-actualisation (Bareither and Bareither, 2019; Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Maslow, 1943).

The Internet: A History

The term 'Internet' was coined by the advisory committee Federal Networking Council (FNC) in 1995 and referred to the internet as a 'global information system' (Bay, 2017). This definition was developed from the original conceptualisations of the internet by American psychologist and computer scientist J.C.R 'Lick' Licklider (1915 – 1990) and colleagues (Leiner et al., 2009). This section discusses the history of the internet as, without the invention of the internet, social media technologies may not have been invented or may exist in different forms to the ones we know today.

Galactic Networking

The genesis of the internet began in August 1962 with Licklider's series of memos. These memos discussed a galactic network concept where people could access information and data on specific sites (Leiner et al., 2009). In October 1962, Licklider became the head of the computer research programme at The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), where he enlightened like-minded individuals of galactic networking (Ibid). Galactic networking referred to a set of computers where individuals, governments, institutions, and corporations could access information and interact with one another (Licklider, 1963). Whilst the term 'galactic networking' has many New Age Californian Counterculture connotations, Licklider's vision was to create a new world, that is, a hub where everyone has access to information, where everything is interconnected (Ibid). Similar to Huxley's 'Brave New World', Licklider was aiming for a 'Galactic New World' (Huxley, 2004). Additionally, in the same way, that Tarcher (1988) suggests the self is a higher being, the galactic networking concept can be thought of as a higher being, a higher consciousness that Licklider wanted everyone to have access to (Licklider, 1963). This ties

into the notion of the noosphere. French philosopher and Jesuit Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881 – 1955) developed the noosphere philosophy (Serafin, 1988). For Teilhard, the noosphere is thought higher than the earth itself and consciousness, which emerges through the interaction of human minds mainly by social circumstances that grow as the earth's population gets bigger. It is considered an essential progression of human existence, which Teilhard refers to as an 'Omega Point' and considers the noosphere as divine salvation (Teilhard de Chardin, 1959).

Frank (2015) expands on the idea of the internet as a noosphere, suggesting that the internet is where collective consciousness occurs online through the coming together of people from different network spheres. Davis (1998), in his book *Techgnosis*, also argues that the internet is a collective consciousness. Many people interested in computers and technology devote time to learning new ways to upload human consciousness into the internet (as noosphere), long after they have passed. By browsing the internet, a user can create online personas through social media platforms or virtual reality games such as fantasy games where they create their own 'avatars' as a representation of themselves online. These online conceptual personas enable people to experiment with representations of the self online and encourage people to create their own alternative realities through technologies available to them. By uploading all this information, the internet is a place that people can find knowledge (gnosis), which continues to live on without human existence (Davis, 1998; Krüger, 2015).

In July 1961, Leonard Kleinrock (1934 -) wrote a paper about packet switching theory which was later developed into a book (Leiner et al., 2009). As previously mentioned, packet switching theory refers to grouping data that is transmitted over a digital network into

packets allowing for the same data path to be accessed by many users (Kleinrock and Lam, 1975). By 1965, Kleinrock convinced fellow researcher from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Lawrence G. Roberts (1937 – 2018), to use packets instead of circuits for computer networking. From here, Roberts and another researcher Thomas Merrill created the first-ever wide-area computer network (Leiner et al., 2009). In 1966, Roberts transferred from MIT to DARPA, where the foundations of today's internet occurred (Leiner et al., 2009).

The World Wide Web (WWW)

The creation of the World Wide Web (WWW) occurred in 1989, by English scientist Tim Berners-Lee (1955 -) (Berners-Lee et al., 2010). Berners-Lee went on to write the first web browser titled 'WorldWideWeb' in 1990 while employed by The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) (Dijick, 2013). In 1992, the American non-profit organisation the Internet Society formed to promote internet equality, and then in 1993, the WWW browser was released (Cerf, 1995). Later in 1993, 'Mosaic' replaced the WWW browser. Mosaic was created by programmers Marc Andreessen (1971 -) and Eric Bina (1964 -) and popularised the use of the internet as it was the first browser that could display images in-line with text rather than displaying images in a separate window (Vetter, Spell, and Ward, 1994).³²

³² Throughout the 1990s, other web browsers began to form leading to the inevitable 'browser wars' –a competition based on personal preference for web browsers and which one would dominate user's choice. Some examples included 'Netscape Navigator' in 1994 and Microsoft's 'Internet Explorer' in 1995 (Windrum, 2004).

The Internet Evolutions: Web 1.0 – Web 4.0

The evolution of the internet has been divided into generations akin to that of the mobile phone. The first was Web 1.0, which was utilised from, 1989 – 2005 and began with the World Wide Web. The aim of Web 1.0 was a universal information structure through the exchange and sharing of information. Web 1.0 consisted of email, contact information such as phone numbers, and advertisements, and was a hyper-text read-only based generation of the internet (Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016; Ankerson, 2015).

Web 2.0, which ran from 2004 – 2006, was a read-write version of the internet, which enabled users to write directly onto the internet without using HTML. Websites began emphasising user-generated content, participatory culture, ease of use, and interoperability (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 maintained the same features as Web 1.0 but had added features such as blogs, bookmarking, audio, chats, e-commerce, e-learning, games, forums, mapping, and multimedia. It was revolutionary for instant two-way communication and allowed the internet to shift from a form of commodity into a form of democracy as many users moved many of their everyday offline activities into online environments (Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016; Barsky and Purdon, 2006). As online environments emerge, this shows the beginning of the internet as a technology that facilitates socialisation, community, and extensions of self (Boyd, 2014a; Belk, 2013).

By 2006, the internet had shifted into Web 3.0, which incorporated semantic tagging of content (Hendler, 2009). For example, the location of an image on Instagram can be embedded semantically inside the image. This is known as data integration, where data can be converted into meaningful information embedded in displays (Ibid). Web 3.0 is more

intelligent, more connected, and more advanced than previous editions, demonstrating the evolution of internet technologies (Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016).

The next generation, Web 4.0 is still under development. Web 4.0 is suggested to be a symbiotic web, where humans and machines can interact in symbiosis (Demartini and Benussi, 2017). Web 4.0 is said to be an evolution of the internet that will be able to think and make decisions concerning user content and user searchers and help create solutions to user's problems (Ibid). Developments for Web 4.0 began in 2012 and are evident in user google-searches and the placement of ads tailored to the user's search history (Nath and Iswary, 2015). Nath and Iswary (2015) also suggest that Web 4.0 may involve giving IP addresses to objects to connect them together. For example, internet users might be able to google their homes to locate their television remote or car keys. This highlights that internet technologies are capable of continuously evolving and may predict the things people want before they even know they want them (Ibid).

The Rise of Social Media

Social media platforms are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.60). They allow for the creation of virtual communities that facilitate connections, provide services, create a sense of belonging and community, allow for users to perform their identity online, and are often extensions of offline communities and the self (Hawai and Samaha, 2017; Belk, 2013). This section discusses the rise of social media platforms.

Social media applications were first accessed on computers, but are now predominately used on, and designed for smartphones. Social media developers tailor their applications towards being the most user-friendly and accessible via smartphones (Arthur, 2012; Southerton and Taylor, 2020). Today, it is commonplace for individuals to carry their smartphones on them at all times. This is because many people, like myself, feel both unsafe and/or unconnected to others without having a device on them. Having my smartphone on me always means I have access to contacts if something goes wrong and can always access social media if I need to unless networks happen to be down. Some explanations for this also discussed in Chapter Five, are being a woman (having a great sense of vulnerability in the world) and living in Christchurch where earthquakes are common (Choi and Merlo, 2020; Radio New Zealand, 2016). This highlights that social context is important for a person’s understanding of the world. Carrying around a smartphone constantly also reinforces my claim throughout this thesis that the smartphone acts as a type of New Age Californian Counterculture bible/sacred text substitute. This is a Protestant-derived metaphor as people carry around a smartphone in the same way many evangelical and

especially 'born again' Protestants carry around a bible, so they always have access to their religion (Adams, 2017).

Social media applications began in the 1970s, have since been evolving, and adapting to the social media user's needs, wants, and desires (Ahmad, 2018). The need for communication and developments in internet technologies were the catalysts for the inevitable emergence of social media. Dominant social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter have permeated their way into the everyday digital canopy (Boyd, 2015), and continue to adapt in the same way that the New Age Californian Counterculture adapts and evolves.

Table 1: Early Social Media Platforms (Pre-2000s)

Social Media Platform	Creators	Years Active	Synopsis
Talkomatic/Term-Talk	CERL ³³ workers David Woolley (1956 -) and Doug Brown	1973 –	A text-based conferencing application, where five active users in a channel could type text where others could see one character appear at a time, implemented a private chat feature and was then renamed ‘Term-Talk’ because it could be accessed from anywhere in PLATO by pressing the ‘TERM’ key and typing ‘talk’ (Woolley, 1994).
Bulletin Board Systems (BBS).	Examples: Computerized Bulletin Board System (CBBS) created by computer	CBBS: 1978 – FidoNet: 1984 –	BBS are software on a computer server that allows users to connect to the system with a terminal programme. Once users are in, they can upload and download data, read the news, and

³³ Computer-based Education Research Laboratory – where Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO) was being developed. PLATO was the first generalised computer-assisted instructed system developed at the University of Illinois during the 1960s and 1970s. It was developed for education purposes rather than networking so did not directly influence ARPANET/DARPA (Jones and Latzko-Toth, 2017). PLATO supported multiple graphic terminals and originally developed many present-day concepts such as instant messaging, chat rooms, remote screen sharing, message boards, online testing, and multiplayer video games (Blitzer, 2011).

	hobbyists Ward Christensen (1945 -) and Randy Suess (1945 - 2019), FidoNet created by Tom Jennings (1955 -)		exchange public messages (Edwards, 2016). CBBS was created after the Great Blizzard of 1978 so users could exchange information, and FidoNet let users exchange information, send, and receive private messages and files (Deffree, 2019; Cassel, 2016).
'Whole Earth Electronic Link' (The WELL)	American writers Stewart Brand (1938 -) and Larry Brilliant (1944 -)	1985 –	The WELL is an online computer conferencing system/virtual community that costs US\$3 an hour, is split into forums where users can have both public and private conversations (Rheingold, 1994).
ICQ	Israeli company Mirabilis	1996 –	A free instant messaging application derived from the English saying, "I Seek You" (Knight, 2018).
Bolt	Dan Pelson and Jane Mount	1996 - 2007	A platform that offered message boards, chatrooms, browser games, and blogs. It was marketed towards teenagers to create content and find

			like-minded people but ended up being more popular with university students aged 18 – 24 (Lippe, 2001).
Six Degrees	Andrew Weinreich	1996 – 2000	Six Degrees is based on the ‘six degrees of separation’ concept discussed below, where users could create their own profiles, view other user’s profiles, organise groups, and invite others to join (Shah, 2016).
Open Diary	American programmer Bruce Ablesoon (1963 -)	1998 – 2014, then relaunched in 2018	An online diary community featuring diaries that are public, private, or friends-only. It went offline in 2014 due to a lack of funds but was relaunched in 2018 with the first month free, and then costing users US \$3.99 per month (Open Diary, 2017).
Live Journal	American programmer Brad Fitzpatrick (1980 -)	1999 –	A Russian social media platform where users can keep a journal, blog, or diary online. Users can either have a basic free account or premium account with extra features and was created so that Fitzpatrick could keep updated on his

			high school friend's' lives after they had left school (Fitzpatrick, 2004).
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Table 1 illustrates a range of early social media platforms (pre-2000s). Two of the early social media platforms applicable to this research are The WELL and Six Degrees. Regarding The WELL, Brand was the editor for the 'Whole Earth Catalog' (WEC) – an American counterculture magazine published regularly between 1968 and 1972, and on a casual basis until 1998 (Kirk, 2018). This catalogue stemmed from the Haight-Ashbury counterculture acting as Brand's way of dispersing alternative ways of life or in New Age Californian Counterculture terms; alternative realities (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994; Aupers and Houtman, 2006). Brand connected with Brilliant at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI) where they were both introduced to the successive nature of computer conferencing and both part of the Californian Counterculture. This is when they realised that computer conferencing could go beyond its use in military, government, and science communications (Rheingold, 1994). The WELL aims to provide its users to search for what they are interested in, connect with like-minded people without location or time constraints, and not have to worry about 'sifting' through real-life friends and acquaintances to find similar minds (Okleshen and Grossbart, 1998). Three factors bind The WELL into a virtual community: social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion. The WELL has social network capital because it increases the number of social networks a user has access to, and knowledge capital because of the heavy presence of symbolic manipulators.³⁴

³⁴ A term used for "individuals whose profession involves the creation, use, and modification of representation" – (Smith, 1992, p.26).

This highlights that members of The WELL are more likely to be teachers, lawyers, programmers, writers, and musicians, which demonstrates they are a community likely to value knowledge. Finally, The WELL has communion because membership is more in-line with traditional communities (such as traditional faith-based communities) where membership consists of rights, obligations, rituals, commitment, and forms of identity modification (Smith, 1992). These factors enable users of The WELL to create emotional bonds with the community, which helps give individuals a sense of purpose and belonging (Ibid). The WELL was the beginning of virtual community as a counterculture, where cyberspace became a technology for interaction, creation of subcultures (forums), and was viewed as a utopian future in the Information Age where technology was viewed as the answer to the Western world's social problems (Ibid). The WELL provides an early example of how social media is reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture as the platform emphasises a New Age Californian Counterculture alternative reality and coming together as a community.

Six Degrees was active from 1996 – 2000 when it was sold to YouthStream Media Networks for US\$125 million in stock. In 1998, the platform had one million registered users but deteriorated in 2000 due to poor web technologies and being ahead of its time (Dlugos, 2017; Heidemann, Klier and Probst, 2012). The 'six degrees of separation' platform was based on the idea that anyone is six or less social connections away from each other; a chain of a 'friend of a friend', where any two people can be connected in a maximum of six steps (Dennie and Cuccia, 2014). This concept originates from Frigyes Karinthy's (1887 – 1938) short story *Chain-Links* (1929), which investigated fictional concepts of what would become future problems of network theory. *Chain-Links* is about how technological advancements in society increased communication forms, travel, and suggested that friendship networks

could continue to grow further over larger distances – that is, a ‘shrinking world’ where human networks got bigger, but social distances became smaller (Karinthy, 1929). This can of course be read as a prediction of the world that was to come, as today, the internet and social media facilitate the fundamental human needs of connection and community (Boyd, 2014a).

Table 2: Contemporary Social Media Platforms (Post-2000s)

Social Media Platform	Creators	Years Active	Synopsis
Habbo	Finish video game designer Sampo Karjalainen (1977 -) and software designer Aopo Kyrölä (1979 -)	2000 –	An online community marketed at teenagers, which lets users create their own avatar, design hotel rooms, chat with others, make friends, and complete quests (Collins, 2007). ³⁵
Friendster	Jonathon Abrams	2002 – 2011, redesigned as a gaming site in 2011 closing in 2015	A platform where users could contact others, make a contacts list, and share online content with those they were connected with. Only users who were connected via four degrees of separation could connect with one another

³⁵ In 2012, the number of registered monthly users was 9 million but dropped to 4 million due to the paedophile scandal, where it was realised that users were using Habbo to send illicit content to minors, and released into the media (Lunden, 2012).

			(Heidemann, Klier, and Probst, 2012).
LinkedIn	Reid Hoffman (1967 –), Eric Ly (1969 –), Allen Blue, Konstantin Guericke (1967 –), and Jean-Luc Valliant	2003 –	A social networking site for businesspeople, with the main goal being to connect and build strategic relationships with other professionals, businesses, organisations, and companies and acts as a digital résumé. It currently has over 65 million professional users (Duermvver, 2018).
MySpace	Thomas Anderson (1970 –) and Chris DeWorld (1966 –)	2003 – 2008	A platform where users could create their own profile, connect with others, embed music and music videos, and create quirky designs (Maranto and Barton, 2010).

WordPress	Matt Mullenweg (1984 -) and Mike Little (1962 -)	2003 –	A platform where users can create their own blog or website without having to know anything about coding. The objective of WordPress is to encourage users to create and monetise digital content (Cabot, 2018).
Second Life	Linden Lab	2003 –	A social media virtual world where users can have an online alternative reality, create their own content, control how it is distributed, sell it, and then convert Linden dollars into US dollars and is often compared to online fantasy gaming sites (Malaby, 2009).

del.icio.us	Peter Gadjokov and Joshua Schacter (1974 -)	2003 - 2019	A social media platform that allowed users to store, share, and find other bookmarks. It was acquired by Yahoo in 2005 who wanted to support further growth and development of the platform and then gifted to Pinboard in 2017 whose creator was friends with Gadjokov (Lekach, 2017).
Hi5	Ramu Yalamanchi (1974 -)	2003 –	A platform similar to MySpace where users can create their own profile with options to customise background, text, and input video HTMLs. Users can add friends and have either a public or a private profile (Cashmore, 2006).

XING	Lars Hinrichs (1976 -)	2003 –	A German-based platform developed to compete with LinkedIn, has both a free basic membership that allows users to create profiles, send messages, and coordinate events and a paid premium membership, which adds users being able to chat with users they are not already connected with (Gardt, 2018).
Flickr	Canadian company Ludicorp	2004 –	An online gallery where users share their images. SmugMug acquired Flickr in 2018 where Flickr became more tailored towards targeting professional photographers (Kuschel, Patel, and Dellavalle, 2018).

Facebook	<p>Mark Zuckerberg (1984 -) and fellow student/roommate Eduardo Saverin (1982 -)</p>	<p>2004 – Prototype for Harvard students, 2006 – launched publicly</p>	<p>Facebook allows users to ‘friend’, ‘follow’, and ‘create and share content’. Users can control their privacy settings, upload and share photos, instantly message others, and ‘comment’, ‘like’, and ‘react’ to other content. It also has fan pages, group pages, advertisements, gives users the ability to stream videos, and is often used for many as a main news source (Nations, 2019). Facebook currently has 2.45 billion monthly active users (Clement, 2019a).</p>
Orkut	<p>Turkish software engineer Orkut Büyükkökten (1975 -</p>	<p>2004 - 2014</p>	<p>Büyükkökten created Orkut because he believed it would create a loving community. It allowed</p>

) while working for Google		users to create new relationships, maintain current ones, and meet new people. It was popular in India and Brazil for its multi-language capabilities but lacked interest from the US so shut down in 2014 (Hasan, 2019).
Tagged	Greg Tsang (1979 -) and Johann Schleier-Smith	2004 –	Tagged is a platform similar to Facebook where users can customise their profile, add friends, view timelines, make statuses, play games, and chat privately with others. It was originally tailored towards high school students but expanded to include all ages (Gregory, 2009).
YouTube	Steve Chen (1978 -), Chad Hurley (1977 -)	2005 –	YouTube is a platform where users can create

	and Jawed Karim (1979 -)		<p>videos, upload them, and watch other user's videos. It was originally intended to be a dating site where users could upload a video of themselves saying what they were looking for in a partner (Entis, 2016).</p> <p>However, Google bought YouTube for \$1.65 billion in 2006, so that Google could have its own video platform service and were hoping for the internet becoming the main source for television viewing (Luckerson, 2016).</p>
Reddit	Steve Huffman (1983 -) and Alexis Ohanian (1983 -)	2005 –	<p>A collection of online forums where users can share content, news, comment on content, and upvote or downvote posts in the same way a user</p>

			<p>'likes' or 'dislikes' something on Facebook. It is broken up into millions of communities called 'subreddits' with each covering a different topic. Users can personalise their homepage and subscribe to specific communities (Nicol, 2018). Reddit was sold to American media company Condé Nast in 2006 (Elkins, 2018).</p>
Bebo	<p>Husband and wife duo British computer programmer Michael Birch (1970 -) and American computer programmer Xochi Birch</p>	2005 – 2013	<p>A social network service where users could create and share content, personalise profiles, send and receive messages, add music, and create questionnaires (The Daily Edge, 2013). The Birches sold Bebo to AOL for \$850 million in 2008, and then</p>

			<p>bought it back for \$1 million in 2013. By 2014, Bebo became a messaging application that uses hashtags and avatars to perform activities such as ‘#draw’, which opens a canvas to draw pictures and send them to friends (Williams, 2014b). This closed down in 2019 (Palmer, 2020).</p>
Qzone	Chinese multinational holding company Tencent Holdings Limited	2005 –	<p>A Chinese social media platform where users can create their own profiles, write blogs, keep diaries, listen to music, send photos, and watch videos. To access most features, users must pay for them (Ho, 2013).</p>
Twitter	American computer programmers, Jack	2006 -	<p>A microblogging social media platform and is</p>

	Dorsey (1976 -), Biz Stone (1974 -), and Evan Williams (1972 -)		referred to as “a short burst of inconsequential information” by Picard (2018). The character limit for tweets began as 140, increasing to 280 in 2017, and is often used as a news source (Wagner, 2017).
VK	Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov (1984 -)	2006 -	A Russian social media platform that offers multiple languages, has privacy options, messaging capabilities, and lets users share content and play games (Baran and Stock, 2015).
Tumblr	David Karp (1986 -) and Marco Arment (1982 -)	2007 –	A social microblogging service where users can create their own content, ‘reblog’ other content, ‘follow’ users, and consists

			mainly of short text posts and images (Boone, 2012).
Sina Weibo	Chinese technology company Sina Corp	2009 –	A Chinese microblogging platform where users can create, share content, and chat with other users. It was created as an alternative platform to Facebook and Twitter as these are blocked in China (Wun, 2018).
Instagram	Kevin Systrom (1983 -) and Mike Krieger (1986 -)	2010 –	Instagram is a photo and video sharing service, where users can share posts publicly or privately (Loren, 2017). It was sold to Facebook in 2012 for US\$1 Billion so that Facebook would not need to compete with one of the most popular photo-

			sharing applications (Reiff, 2019).
Pinterest	Evan Sharp (1982 -), Ben Silbermann (1982 -), and Paul Sciarra (1981 -)	2010 –	A platform where users visually share their interests and find new interests through ‘pinning’ content to an online pinboard similar to a vision board (Meng, 2019).
Path	Dave Morin (1980 -) and Shawn Fanning (1980 -)	2010 – 2018	A social media site featuring photo sharing and messaging services, that shut down in 2018 due to declining interest (Dent, 2018).
Google+	Google	2011 – 2012	Search engine Google, which usually acquires money through advertisements, wanted to gain capital from the social media hype, so began Google+ to compete with

			Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Users could post photos and status updates and connect into circles – multi-person networks for instant messaging, text, and video chats. Google+ was unsuccessful, closing down in 2012 (Eadicicco, 2015).
Snapchat	Former Stanford University students Evan Spiegel (1990 -), Bobby Murphy (1988 -), and Reggie Brown ³⁶	2011 –	Snapchat is a social media application purely for smartphones, with the core concept being that whoever is sent an image, text, or video, is only shown the content for a short period before it disappears (Tillman and Betters, 2019).

³⁶ Reggie Brown ‘allegedly’ claimed that Spiegel and Murphy took his original idea for Snapchat and shoved him out of the company. He filed a lawsuit in 2013 and was given \$157.5 million in 2014 (Heath, 2017).

Keek (rebranded as Peeks Social in 2016)	Isaac Raichyk	2011 –	A social media platform that lets users upload 36-second video status updates about their lives called Keeks. It was rebranded in 2016 to Peeks Social, adding new features such as messaging, the ability to sell products, a mobile wallet, and ad sharing, as well as the 36-video clips (Peeks Social, n.d).
Vine	Dom Hofmann (1986 -), Rus Yusupov (1984 -), and Colin Kroll (1984 -)	2013 – 2016	Vine allowed users to share 6-second video clips of anything, with the idea behind this being that people could capture real-time moments of their lives and share them around the world. Vine was sold to Twitter in 2012 for \$30 million before

			being released into the public sphere (Newton, 2016).
Google Hangouts	Google	2013 -	Another attempt by Google to compete with other social media platforms, which allows users to chat with one or more users at a time. It is predominately now just a messaging and call service (Hollister, 2019).
Periscope	Keyvon Beykopour (1988 -) and Joe Bernstein	2015 –	A live-streaming video application for smartphones, which was sold to Twitter before its launch date (Shontell, 2015).
Meerkat (rebranded to Houseparty)	Ben Rubin (1988 -)	2015 –	A live-streaming video application, which added a messaging feature when

			rebranded to Houseparty (Johnson, 2018).
Hello network	Orkut Büyükkökten	2016 –	Even though Orkut shut down in 2014, Büyükkökten was still passionate about community so created hello network, which is a platform, based on love reactions rather than ‘likes.’ It incorporates and reworks features from other applications, does not allow text-based posts, but instead customisation of images and uses tagged interests so users can connect with similar people (Ghoshal, 2016).
TikTok	Chinese Internet Company ByteDance	2017 –	A social media platform used for creating and sharing short videos of 3 – 60 seconds long, and

			<p>music videos 3 – 15 seconds long via smartphones (Lewington, 2019). TikTok has since risen in popularity becoming the most downloaded Chinese application in the US as of 2018 and uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to analyse user's interests through content they interact with, displaying a personalised feed (Davis, 2019).³⁷</p>
Byte	Dom Hofmann	2019 –	<p>In 2019, Hoffman decided he wanted another video looping application to succeed, so has launched Byte, which is currently going through beta testing (Wilde, 2019).</p>

³⁷ TikTok has come under a lot of controversy and is banned in many countries such as India and Pakistan, and Donald Trump, former president of the United States, attempted to ban this platform in the US to threaten China (Paul, 2020).

Table 2 summarises the contemporary social media platforms (post-2000s). The social media platforms applicable to this research from this table are WordPress, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine.

WordPress encourages users to create and monetise digital content and engage in digital capitalism. This is where digital technologies mediate the “structural tendencies of capitalism” giving an illusion of an equal free-market capitalist digital society (Pace, 2018, p.263). It is an illusion of an equal free market because it is not equal at all. It is unequal because not every social media user gains the same benefits or types of capital (Ibid). Through the implementation of user-generated content, marketing companies can use social media platforms to target specific audiences in order to sell commodities (Saravanaumar, SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). Social media users who utilise monetising digital content are encouraged to create their own alternative reality on social media whereby they construct and curate in personalised ways to create their own personalised package of meaning, which is a characteristic of the New Age Californian Counterculture. This idea is further developed in Chapter Six regarding Huda Kattan who began her online career with a WordPress blog in 2010 (Schaefer, 2016).

Facebook is a social media application that continuously evolves and updates its features. An example of this was the introduction of the new ‘react’ concept where a user can like, heart, haha-react, wow-react, sad-react, or angry-react to a post in 2016 (Hines, 2016). Facebook is one of the social media platforms that I primarily use, and from my own experience, I have noticed that the demographics of members has changed. I began Facebook in 2009 in my first year of high school because all my friends were making accounts. Now, in my seventh year of university in 2020, I mainly use it as a means of

communication to talk to my friends, especially those overseas. Younger generations are using other forms of social media, such as Snapchat and Instagram, primarily to create a private divide from their parents (Boyd, 2014b). This is evident from Statista's 2019 figures of Facebook user's demographics. As of July 2019, users aged 13 – 17 made up 5.9% of users, and users aged 35 – 44 made up 16.5% of users. The major users of Facebook are males aged 25 – 34, which make up 19.3%, and females aged 18 – 24, which make up 14.1%. This helps to outline the aging demographic of Facebook users (Clement, 2019b) and also shows that the younger social media users have taken it upon themselves to create alternative realities online, away from the platforms their parents use.

Access to Instagram is offered via a computer, laptop, or smartphone; however, posting content can be only possible from a smartphone (Bell, 2019). Arguably, this is to encourage users to post content in real-time and spend significant amounts of time scrolling (Berthelsen and Tannert, 2020). Each profile has a follower count, users can 'heart' posts as a like-system and directly messages others. It is also possible to edit and filter photos, share stories available for 24 hours, and add story highlights to their profiles (Moreau, 2019). Instagram first began as an iPhone-only application in 2010 but due to the demand for the platform from social media users, it extended to android smartphones in 2012 (Laestadius, 2018). Instagram forms the basis of the textual analysis using visual techniques in Chapter Six.

Snapchat was originally designed to encourage natural interaction between people and was partly based on people wanting to have disappearing photos³⁸ so that they could send nudes without having to worry about them being leaked anywhere (Tillman and

³⁸ Photos that would expire after a certain period of time.

Betters, 2019). With the constant evolutions of technology and the wants and needs of social media users, Snapchat now permits users to live video chat, send short video clips, create their own Bitmoji avatars (a cartoon of oneself), share 24-hour stories, and apply filters³⁹ to their images and videos. Snapchat users tend to send each other selfie snaps as a form of communication, which could be considered a way that the self is worshipped, idolised, or thought highly of, online. As the application does not save information like other social media, it means the need for self-censorship is less apparent (Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid, 2015). Via Snapchat, users let people into their lives on a more intimate level, and from my own experiences with Snapchat, I can see my friend in Canada in real-time, where she goes, what she is doing, and who she is with if she sends me snaps. I have also noticed that many people who use Snapchat often say, “I have to Snapchat this” at moments that could be better experienced by just being present. Snapchat acquires revenue through advertisements, sponsored filters, products such as ‘Snapchat spectacles’, and sports partnerships (Rioja, 2019).

Vine was a social media platform that defied social media norms in the same way that American artist Andy Warhol’s (1928 – 1987) pop art challenged traditional art (Crotty, 2018). As suggested by its name, pop art is art inspired by popular culture, and usually involves alternative tools to create art such as Warhol’s use of soup cans (Davidson, 2018). For pop artists to make a profit they need to mass-produce art (Mattick, 1998); in the same way, Vine users need to mass-produce videos to gain followers. Additionally, Vine’s concept of representation stems back to Guy Debord’s 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle*, which argues that authentic social life has been replaced with representation and the quality of life

³⁹ The most popular type of filters on Snapchat are those that change the appearance of a user’s face to make someone look silly or appear more attractive (Tillman and Betters, 2019).

is depleted; when images uphold more importance than genuine human interaction (Debord, 1994). This idea can also be applied to Instagram, and as some of the Instagram Influencers I analyse in Chapter Six began their careers on Vine, such as Cameron Dallas and Nash Grier. It becomes evident that Vine was a social media platform that may have been reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Social Media Demographics – Is it gendered?

It is evident from tables 1 and 2 that young Western men have created most social media platforms, yet most users of these platforms are women. This is supported by the Pew Research Center's 2018 statistics on social media. 75 percent of US women use Facebook in comparison to 63 percent of US men, 43 percent of US women use Instagram in comparison to 31 percent of US men, and 42 percent of US women use Pinterest in comparison to 15 percent of US men. For LinkedIn, Twitter, and Reddit, there is a higher percentage of men, but a smaller number of overall users. For Snapchat, use by both US women and men is sitting at 24 percent (Pew Research Center, 2019). There may be a plethora of reasons for this but Vermeren (2015) suggests women are more likely to use social media for connections and sharing, whereas men are more likely to use it for networking and business matters, which is one reason why such applications have been created by men. Atanasova (2016a) expands on this claim by saying that women and men communicate differently which is reflected in their social media use. For example, online behaviours for women tend to be towards maintaining existing relations, whereas men are often more concerned with creating new relations. Whilst women often post about personal information, men tend to engage in more abstract topics, such as politics (Ibid). Women seem to prefer visual platforms, which is evident from the above statistics, whereas men gravitate towards more text-based platforms, highlighting why applications such as Reddit are more popular with men. Finally, self-presentation differs for men and women on social media, whilst men are more likely to present self-promotional content, such as music, writing, and videos, women are more likely to gravitate towards posting selfies, tutorials – makeup tutorials for example – and cute content such as animals (Ibid).

Just as social media use is heavily gendered, so are those who identify as being New Age. From a survey of 141 Americans, conducted by Pew Research Center (2014), 61% of women identified as New Age, whereas 38% of men identified as New Age. Some reasons for this are that women are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their lives and seek gratification and that more women are the ones who teach alternative spiritualities (Trzebiatowski and Bruce, 2013), such as Shirley MacLaine and Marilyn Ferguson mentioned in Chapter Three. The empowerment women feel from coming together and seeing other women in powerful positions in alternative spiritualities, like the New Age Californian Counterculture, is often what attracts more women to identify with these spiritualities (Ibid). This highlights that participation in the New Age Californian Counterculture is heavily gendered and may be more tailored towards women over men. Many elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture also allow women to express their authentic selves (Thompson, 2018). The 'authentic' self is who someone is on the inside, no matter what way they present themselves to others (Joseph, 2016). To find one's authentic self in the New Age Californian Counterculture, people, especially women, are encouraged to experiment with alternative states of consciousness and representations of self to reach self-actualisation (Wellman et al., 2020; Maslow, 1943). Tarcher (1988) provides a framework for the higher authentic self, which as this thesis will show, can be conceptualised on Instagram. The authentic self can be socially constructed and written into being on social media (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Women may turn to social media platforms for the same reason they turn to the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Californication: Present-Day Social Media

The emergence of the internet has led to a global digital canopy where communication is instant. Whilst many social media platforms have garnered success through actively developing and adapting to society, others have been less successful. As of July 2020, there were 3.96 billion active social media users worldwide (Kemp, 2020). Social media facilitates and encourages the creation of digital data and digital capitalism with ever-increasing users, transactions, and exchanges of goods and services will likely continue to increase online (Fuchs, 2014).

Willis (2017) suggests there are six elements to how social media is engaged and communicated with within contemporary society: the creation of a sense of urgency and a need to share, an inside perspective of faraway places, the ability to share full stories rather than just highlights, digital messages and more personalisation of content news has been brought into millennial life, and an ability to broadcast moments live.

Through face-to-face interaction, it is expected that a person will respond relatively immediately to someone when they are speaking, in contrast texting, email, and instant messaging, make it possible to sit and dwell on information before responding (though letters, postcards, and faxes also enabled this). Applications, such as Snapchat, with disappearing messages, create a sense of urgency for users to respond straight away (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Facebook's 'seen' feature in messenger gives the impression that someone should respond straight away if they have opened the message. If they do not, the person who sent the message may feel ignored (Palfrey, 2017). This shows that some applications encourage users to feel the need to respond to others immediately. Regarding the need to share, social media platforms advocate the sharing of information, , especially

information about ourselves, so that the reward-seeking part of the brain is activated (Sutradhar, 2017). Humans share for many different reasons, such as to create a specific perception of themselves. For example, sharing a funny story makes someone seem funny so if someone was to share funny things online, they may be likely to gain popularity for their humour and perceived as funny (Berger, 2013).

Social media allow people to see the world from the comfort of their own homes. One example of this is via Instagram, as when a user scrolls through their Instagram feed and sees images of faraway places, which may make these users feel as if they can experience these places without going there. This is one way social media platforms can encourage people to spend more and more time scrolling social media, by giving someone this type of illusion (Willis, 2017). By enabling users to share snippets of stories, followers can see events without being there, such as a graduation ceremony when someone was unable to attend. This is evident with live stories on Snapchat and Instagram (Willis, 2017). The most prolific example of digital messages being personalised is the option of being able to add filters, text, and drawings to one's content. For example, Snapchat is constantly updating its filters so that when a user takes a selfie, they can transform their image into something else or enhance the way they look (Elgersma, 2018).

Evidence from the Pew Research Center and Wibbitz support that news is gained from social media applications for millennials. In 2014, Pew Research Center surveyed 2901 adults aged 18 – 68 and found that 61 percent of millennials (those aged 18 – 33) got their political news from Facebook, and only 37 percent of participants trusted television news (Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa, 2015). In 2015, online marketing company Wibbitz conducted a survey asking 1100 US adults between the ages of 18 – 59 how participants got

their news. The results were that most millennials received their news via digital sources or social media, with 43.41 percent of respondents accessing news through their smartphones, and 23 percent through social media (Gould and Stenovec, 2015). Statista presented more recent statistics in support of millennials gaining their news from social media platforms. In 2020, an online survey conducted by Watson (2020) in the US, found that 57% of millennials accessed news daily on social media.⁴⁰ However, this study does not provide the number of survey respondents.

Having the ability to broadcast moments live has both positive and negative consequences. For example, live streaming promotes cultural awareness, allows serious conversations to be held, and enables people to see things in real-time even if they are on the other side of the world (Willis, 2017). Police brutalities and criminal activities have also been live streamed, which can take away immediate censorship but also helps to promote awareness (Ibid). One negative consequence of live streaming was the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings broadcast live on Facebook (Strang, 2020).

Social media platforms are a permanent feature of contemporary culture. These are platforms have changed the way people communicate, think, find and access information; through access to the internet and social media, people can exchange instant messages, ideas, and information without the constraints of location or time (Gleeson et al., 2016). As social media has become central for creating ties and relationships, strengthening bonds, and a platform for sharing, it demonstrates that the West is now a post-social society (Varis and Bloommaert, 2015). A post-social society is where networks such as social media platforms have become the preferred method to establish and maintain connections with

⁴⁰ This is not reflected in New Zealand (NZ) as many millennials trust word of mouth over information provided in social media (New Zealand on Air, 2020).

others over traditional communities such as places of worship (Ibid). As social media has facilitated a post-social society, it is reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture as many people turn to such platforms to create alternative realities and connect and communicate with other people (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Gleeson et al., 2016).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the contemporary digital canopy in regards to the history of communication with discussions of Digital Technologies, Mobile Phone Technologies, and The Smartphone, the history of the internet with discussions of Galactic Networking, The World Wide Web (WWW), and The Internet Evolutions, and the history of social media with discussions of early forms (pre-2000s) and contemporary forms (post-2000s). In the social media section, I explored what social media platforms are important to the New Age Californian Counterculture such as The WELL, Six Degrees, WordPress, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine. Finally, I made further connections to the New Age Californian Counterculture by exploring how social media is engaged with in contemporary society.

Chapter Five: The Self, The Soul, and The Social

Introduction

The use of social media has become normalised in Western society and culture, becoming a main source of news, communication, and interaction, and a way that many people often gain social, economic, and knowledge capital (Zúñiga, Barnidge, and Scherman, 2017). Social media provides context that shapes a person's worldview, opinions, and experiences (Phoon, 2017). Because social media provides context in this way, it is productive to make use of the self as a research method. By studying the self, a researcher can form new ways of thinking and understandings many social, political, and cultural phenomena (Denshire, 2014). This chapter presents an autoethnographic analysis of my own social media use, and insights from this are threaded throughout this thesis. It begins with some affordances of social media, my personal smartphone and social media use, and then considers a list of themes to contextualise my findings for further analysis.

Autoethnography Analysis

This section outlines some affordances of social media and an autoethnographic account of my own smartphone and social media use.

Affordances of Social Media

According to Gibson (1979), affordances are all the particular ways a person interacts with a material object, thing, or technology, such as sitting on a chair or being able to throw a chair, with different chairs created for different individuals. For example, small chairs designed for children, and larger chairs designed for adults. Affordances are about the constitutional relationship between something and a human being; the way a person intuitively uses something (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1990). The affordances of social media platforms are what they allow people to do and the specific ways they have been designed (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Cornelio and Roig, 2020). For example, social media platforms encourage users to continuously scroll social media feeds, encourage users to constantly check their phones as most platforms are specifically designed to be used on a smartphone, and encourage digital distraction for significant amounts of time (Rashidi et al., 2020; Lee, 2015; Gibbs, Rozaidi, and Eisenberg, 2013). These are all behaviours that I personally partake in. Further overall affordances of social media platforms are connectivity, visibility, social feedback (gratification), persistence, and accessibility (Fox and Moreland, 2015). Some examples of the affordances of Facebook are that it facilitates instant communication through messenger, people can connect with both people they already know as well as expand their network to meet new people, and provides a way to share content as well as gratification through the 'liking' system (Moreno and Uhls, 2019; Fox and Moreland, 2015). The main affordance of Instagram is that it is a visual social media platform where the idea

is to post content of images for other people to consume (Hurley, 2019). Certain images are given more traction in regards to Instagram's algorithm, for example, images that are of higher quality such as those taken with top-end DSLRs, images in portrait format with a specific pixel size of 1080px x 1350px (Dahlin, 2020), and images of the Instagram account owner such as selfies are shown in feeds for longer (Hurley, 2019). In addition, posting more content on Instagram helps a user's content stay on other users' feeds for longer (Cooper, 2020). Further discussion of Instagram's algorithm will be seen in Chapter Six.

Personal Smartphone and Social Media Use

As soon as I wake up in the morning, I habitually check my phone, or if I wake up during the night, I tend to check my phone. This behaviour has become so habitual that I often find myself specifically waking up during the night where the only thing I do is check my phone and go back to sleep. I do not put my phone in a different room to stop this interruption in sleep occurring because I use my phone as an alarm clock to wake up each morning. I also do not put my phone in another room at night because I would feel anxious or distressed without it. This is because I feel much safer knowing the phone is next to me to call for help if an emergency were to arise. For example, if a person tried to break into my house or there was a fire, I could easily grab my phone to call for help. I worry that if my phone was not nearby it could become the difference between life and death in some situations. I also like to always be able to access my phone, to be contactable, or to contact others, which means my smartphone is a type of safety blanket for me. I suspect this is due to the following reasons; I am a woman living in a Western country, where it is socially constructed that women are more likely to be victims of crime than men are (Choi and Merlo, 2020; Chesney-Lind, and Eliason, 2006), I live in Christchurch, New Zealand where

earthquakes are common (Radio New Zealand, 2016), and I often feel empathetic to other people's anxieties or concerns about my safety.

The social media platforms I currently use are Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn, with each platform serving a particular purpose. I use Instagram to post images of photography, food, travel, and lifestyle and to find inspiration for my own photography. I use Facebook to communicate with friends and family and to post photography. I downloaded Snapchat the year I began university as all my friends from high school had it and I wanted to fit in. Reddit is a platform I use when I want to be away from everyone in my specific circle of friends, when I want to be away from people I know, but still feel like I am connected to a community of people. Twitter is a platform I use to keep up-to-date with news and reality television and I have just started to use LinkedIn as an academic.

I have had both positive and negative experiences with social media use. Positive experiences include having gained photography jobs including being employed as a photographer for weddings and selling prints online, finding new connections that would not have been possible without social media, feelings of gratification and support, and a technology with which it is safe to discuss mental health with others. Negative experiences include having my accounts hacked by someone who used to be close to me, being blocked by family members, as well as digital distraction and emotional regulation.

Photography is a hobby of mine, and social media technologies enable me to share photographs I take online. For example, I have a Facebook business page where people can contact me for photography work or if they want to purchase prints and Instagram provides a gallery-like grid, where I can present my images aesthetically. I first began my Facebook

business page because I was asked by a cousin of mine to take photos at her 21st in 2013 and she wanted them on social media, so it was the easiest way for me to share them publicly. I did not see any benefit of deleting the page after this so I kept it to see if I could gain more photography work, which I have done, for example, photographing weddings. I also post images online to receive gratification from other people as it reaffirms the images I have taken are of good quality and makes me want to improve my work to gain even more gratification. As well as gratification, I receive encouragement from both the Facebook and Instagram community to continue to pursue photography as a hobby as well as for part-time work.

With the implementation of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, the way people share images has changed, from just being in person to a new era of digital photography where consumers demand instantaneously (Geurin and Burch, 2017). Previously, film cameras⁴¹ were used to take a photograph, and then the film had to be developed to produce a physical print. To show that print to another person would require sending it via mail or showing it in-person (Dainty, 2012). With the invention of digital cameras and smartphones, a photograph can now be kept as a digital file and can be shared online instantly through email and social media (Ibid).

As well as sharing photography on social media platforms, I also share major life events, food creations, or photos of food I eat in a restaurant, and most recently, self-care and well-being tips. I share major life events on social media because I want to keep others up-to-date with what is going on in my life without having to individually message/text/call each person. I share food creations because I want to know if they are aesthetically pleasing

⁴¹ This is not to say film cameras have completely been replaced with digital photography, just that new technologies have been implemented.

and I also share food that I think looks pretty or appetising from restaurants. I also want to know if the food photography will do as well as other sorts of photography I post online, like landscape photography, and to expand my network of social media connections. I have started to post self-care and well-being tips mainly for myself to help improve my own overall happiness and well-being. I have posted more of these during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ciotti et al., 2020).

To generalise the idea of sharing on social media, the question arises: why do people share on social media? Oh and Syn (2015) investigated the motivations of sharing on social media by surveying 1056 social media users. Ten common factors for sharing online were found. These were learning, self-efficacy, enjoyment, altruism, personal gain, empathy, community interest, social engagement, reciprocity, and reputation. Each of these factors correlated with one another in some way. This study also found that different social media platforms related to different motivations for sharing. For example, Oh and Syn's (2015) participants claimed to use Twitter for sharing news and Facebook for building community and engagement. My own use of these platforms reflects this finding. Further support of this is shown by Ham et al. (2019) who, through focus groups and two online surveys, found that the motivations for sharing on social media correlated with factors such as easy connection, social presence, social conversation, and self-management. The motivation 'easy connection' highlights the idea that by sharing on social media, users can stay connected with one another, the 'social presence' element is a way for social media users to present themselves in a particular way, the 'social conversation' element is that users can share their thoughts and feelings with others in order to socialise, and finally, the 'self-management' element provides the idea that users can manage their own content and learning (Ibid).

One final personal experience with social media I will share here is an instance of “phubbing” that happened to me in the year 2017. I caught up with an old friend who I had not seen in about 10 years at a café for coffee and a catch-up. When we met, he just scrolled through his social media feeds and chatted to other people online, rather than engaging in conversation with me. I found this rude; as we had not seen each other in a long time so I felt time was not invested in the conversation with myself. This kind of behaviour could simply be due to habit or due to the context of where we met as many people who catch-up in cafés often scroll through social media, emphasising that the smartphone is a device that enables people to gain community that is not always in real life (Bareither and Bareither, 2019). Social media is something that gives people meaning, a sense of purpose, and creates community and connection where people may not already have it (Noor and Hendricks, 2011; Boyd, 2014a). My friend may have felt he already had these elements in his smartphone, so he did not feel the need to engage with me. However, he might have been nervous, was using a form of emotional regulation, or was simply partaking in a habit. The way I responded to this instance of phubbing was to try to convince my friend to engage with me by calling him out on his behaviour. This did not work as it appeared he was offended (or even embarrassed, and did not expect me to call him out on his behaviour), and did not want to get off his smartphone. Eventually, I gave up, left, and thought his friendship was not worth my time. I have not made contact since.

Themes

This section discusses some themes to contextualise my findings from my autoethnography analysis of my own social media and smartphone use. These themes were constructed based on reviewing relevant literature regarding religion, social media, and smartphone affordances. I also connect these themes to the New Age Californian Counterculture, to demonstrate how everyday people, such as myself, can express attributes of this counterculture, highlighting how social media is a New Religious Movement.

Contemporary Religiosity

Contemporary religiosity is intertwined with everyday life because religiosity is concerned with how a person lives their particular religion, what behaviours they participate in, what rituals they complete daily, and even how people consume products and content in a globalised world (Illiyun, 2018; Aguilar et al., 2017). Contemporary religiosity is less about structured collective religions and more to do with unstructured, individual religions, like the New Age Californian Counterculture, where people can draw on a variety of rituals, beliefs, narratives, and doctrines to inform how they interpret the world and construct their own religion (Noble, 2019).

In an interview with American journalist Tara Isabella Burton (1990 -), about her recently published book *Strange Rites*, Burton claims that Americans are not abandoning traditional forms of religion, but that religion is taking on new forms, where people want to craft their own New Religious Movements or religiosity rather than adhere to traditional religious institutions (Wiseman, 2020). She argues that many people, especially millennials, have become distrusting of religious leaders, medical information, and journalists and that if

they do not trust such institutions, then they are more likely to look inwards, towards the self (Ibid). Lewis (2019) supports the claim of distrust in journalists and news sources, suggesting that many people all over the world, not just Americans, find news bias, complicated, and contradictory as many people have the perception that journalists will manipulate narratives to tell present information in a way that is beneficial to them (Ibid). Fritz and Holton (2019) and Hensher, Tisdell, and Zimitat (2017) support the claim of a distrust occurring in regards to medical information, suggesting that saturation of medical information and people having too many medical tests without ever finding out what is wrong with them are two factors causing this distrust. Lastly, Jones and Elliott (2017) support the claim that there is a growing distrust in religious leaders and explicit religion leading to people wanting to create their own religions. This perspective is based on an idea that the self is the most authoritative source of knowledge and information about the world (Heelas, 1996), which emphasises the importance of studying the self, as inside the self is where the heart of religiosity lies in contemporary society. In relation to myself, I trust medical professionals, but I do not always trust the news. I prefer to do my own research and it is often hard to decipher fact from fiction if I am not there when something happens. I try to be open-minded about explicit religions, as I know they have many benefits but I personally would not identify with an explicit religion because I do not think it would add anything to my life as I gain similar benefits from the use of social media. I would prefer to search for meaning and purpose as a New Age Californian Counterculture devotee would (Aupers and Houtman, 2006).

Habitual and Ritualistic Behaviour

My Apple iPhone 6 is a device that enables me to use social media platforms anywhere, as long as I have an internet connection and reception (Bareither and Bareither, 2019). Some behaviours I participate in that I consider secular rituals are scrolling Instagram when I wake up in the morning and before I go to sleep at night, and scrolling both Instagram and Facebook around lunchtime when I have a break. I aim to post one photo on Instagram per day to keep a routine. I do this because Instagram's algorithm favours users who post more content consistently (Cooper, 2020). Sometimes, I catch myself taking photos just to post on Instagram and not anywhere else. I also try to regularly post story updates to keep my followers up-to-date with my life. Photos I post in my stories on Instagram tend to be photos of sunsets and sunrises that I take myself.⁴² I will wake up early to get long exposures of sunrises at the beach and will take photos at sunset because I find the lighting really good and easy to work with. I started doing this as a way to learn how light reflects in both my DSLR and phone camera, as a way to improve my photography, emphasising my own personal development and growth. In regards to the New Age Californian Counterculture, the symbolism of sunrises and sunsets are important here because sunrises represent new lives or new hope and sunsets represent a life that may be about to end or the end of existence (Peskin, Allen, and Wells-Jopling, 2010; Olderr, 1986). This relates to the attribute of the New Age Californian Counterculture of having a new life or that there is a better life to come (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994).

⁴² The times of the day when sunrises and sunsets occur are often the best times to take photos because the brightness of the sky matches the brightness of streetlights, car headlights, lit windows, and signs, making it a prestigious time to take photographs (Yin et al., 2013).

If a post of mine on Instagram gains a lot of 'likes' or increases my follower count relatively quickly, I feel good, leading me to spend more time on the platform, where I often 'lose time'. This highlights how the smartphone is a technology that enables people to scroll social media anywhere and for significant periods that has become mundane and part of the 'everyday' and 'every time', akin to 'religare' and 'relegere' (Mustafi, 2019). Many smartphone users are bound to their smartphones, in the same way, that someone explicitly religious may be committed to devotion, faith, or worship (Durkheim, 1912, McClure 2017; Kucinkas, Wright and Riepl, 2018). The smartphone is the device that keeps people connected to others, to their religion, no matter their location, time, or other barriers. This further supports the idea that the smartphone can be a New Age Californian Counterculture bible/sacred text substitute. The smartphone is a device that enables people to be connected to others across multiple locations and times through an internet connection, as well as connected to the object of devotion⁴³ meaning that the internet is a digital ecclesia; that is, a digital coming together⁴⁴ of people through the use of the internet and logging on to social media platforms through their smartphone (Rotondi, Stanca, and Tomasuolo, 2017).

As previously mentioned, food photography is a type of photography I do, where I take photos of my own food and post them online as well as the food I eat when I go out to restaurants if I think it looks aesthetically pleasing or pretty. Taking a picture of food before the food is consumed can be considered a form of ritual (Atanasova, 2016b). Vohs et al. (2013) have found that performing rituals enhanced the consumption and taste of food. 52 students were randomly assigned to two groups: categorised as ritual and non-ritual. Each

⁴³ Such as social media influencers, discussed in ChapterSix.

⁴⁴ Where people feel connected through the mundane.

group were given a chocolate bar, and the ritual group was told to break the chocolate bar in half without opening the packaging, unwrap half of the bar, and then eat it. The non-ritual group were told to eat the chocolate bar naturally. Following the consumption of the chocolate bar, participants were asked to fill in a survey about how much they enjoyed the chocolate bar. Results showed that those in the ritual group enjoyed the taste and experience of eating the chocolate bar more than those assigned to the non-ritual group (Ibid). Furthermore, Atanasova (2016b) argues that “foodstagramming”⁴⁵ fulfils several purposes: food photos are relevant to everyone, easy to produce, are a fast way to show others what people are up to, and are used as a form of self-presentation (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Goffman, 1969).

A study by Diehl, Zauberman, and Barasch (2016) found that taking photos can increase the enjoyment of experiences such as eating a meal. 149 diners were recruited to enjoy a meal at a farmer’s market in Philadelphia and were asked to either take at least 3 photos of their meal or eat their meal as they would at home. Those who were asked to take photos took significantly more photos than those who did not. After their meal, participants were asked to complete a short survey. The researchers found that those who took photos felt that they made their mundane everyday eating experiences more enjoyable (Ibid). It is impossible to say for sure without doing a separate study, but I could enjoy my food more if I take a photo of it before consuming the food. Some reasons I suspect for this could be because I would likely put more effort into making food if I knew I was going to take a picture of it at the end, wanting to share with other people food I am eating when I am out, lighting for food photography is hard so I learn new things in the

⁴⁵ Posting food photography on social media.

process, and wanting to present myself in a certain way online (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Goffman, 1969). Posting food photography along with other types of photography on social media expands the network of people I can connect with online. If I just posted landscape photography, then I would likely only be connecting with other landscape photographers or people interested in my work. By adding photos such as food, I believe it expands the community to those interested in both photography and food.

Community and Connections

There is a need for many humans to find connections and community (Smith, 2013) with many turning to religious communities to do so (Youniss, McLellan and Yates, 1999). Nancy (1990) rejects the notion that community is produced by 'work' in his book *The Inoperative Community*. This means that a group of people who come together for no specific purpose other than just 'being together' is driven by the mere purpose of sharing (communion) rather than being driven by individual desires or collective insecurities. Nancy (1990, p.28) says:

Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an originary or ontological "sociality" that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being.

Nancy (1990) suggests that the desire for community occurs through nostalgia – a longing for the past, and a return to archaic communities such as the nuclear family, the first Christian community, or the Roman Republic. Such communities have disappeared through modern innovations and social, political, historical, and cultural changes throughout the

Western world. These communities brought people together through harmony, belonging, unity, and communion. Whereas, modern society is alienating and driven by self-interests.

Since social media has emerged, many people now find communities online (Chayko, 2020). These communities are usually found by sharing content, which relates to what Nancy (1990) refers to as “communion” – the act of sharing as a way for community to form. Through my use of Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, I gain connections and community and more importantly, more than just one connection or one community. I gain multiple connections and multiple communities, which can overlap, but these are new forms of community where people are “digitally” gathered together. I also follow what others are doing, as noted in Chapter Four, I began a Facebook account in 2009 when all my friends were joining. I also wanted to feel digitally connected to my high school friends. When someone befriends me on Facebook, I feel that we are really friends in real life. Today, I use Facebook as a means of communication that allows me to overcome barriers of time and distance. Befriending other Facebook users and communicating with them daily gives me a sense of belonging that may not have come about without the use of social media. This is similar to how Sebald (1984) suggests belonging is part of the New Age Californian Counterculture and also similar to the ‘belongingness hypothesis’ put forward by Baumeister and Leary (1995), that humans desiring interpersonal relationships is a basic human function (Ibid).

Escapism

There are many times when I feel like I want to escape from the world for a few hours at a time, where I want to feel disconnected and away from everyone and all of life’s drama. At times like this, I turn to social media meaning I am still connected to the world.

Social media may be creating feelings of anomie (Durkheim, 1964) because people believe there is no alternative to dealing with this feeling, similar to how Mark Fisher suggests in his book *Capitalism Realism* (Fisher, 2009) that people cannot think of an alternative to capitalism. Fisher (2009) also says that as long as people believe capitalism is inherently bad, then they are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange. Social media users may believe that the behaviours they partake in are bad, but because they view them as bad, they view it as okay to keep doing, which can create a cycle of normative behaviour (O'Reilly et al., 2018). When I want to feel as if I am escaping reality, I choose a format of social media that I do not usually use, Reddit, instead of disengaging with technology completely. The only explanation for this that I have is that I am not connected or associated with anyone I know in real life on Reddit; it is a form of social media that provides an escape from people I know. Reddit allows me to feel as if I am away from the world, similar to being in a sect. To explain this idea is to use Troelstch's two sociological forms of the Christian idea: the church-type and the sect-type. The church-type emphasises the coming together of the masses, where salvation is already considered a given, whilst the sect-type is not outside the Christian tradition but is an independent way of Christian living where membership is voluntary (Troelstch, 1991). The church turns inwards towards the world whereas the sect turns away from the world (Ibid). Johnson (1957, p.88) says that "In social ethic the Sect is either revolutionary, seeking to radically reform the existing social order, or passively critical, ultimately withdrawing into small communities where the pure religious ideal can be practiced." I argue that Reddit is a passively critical social media platform that is made up of many small communities of people who are turning away from the world, where subreddits can be considered sects.

Throughout my undergraduate studies, if I was feeling down, I would scroll through Twitter as a form of emotional deregulation, to reinforce my negative mood, and as another way to deal with anomie (Fisher, 2009; Durkheim, 1964). People tend to regulate their emotions by doing certain things that keep them feeling down which is often because people want to avoid problems in their lives (Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven, 2001). My past behaviour of scrolling Twitter, a toxic place for me, and scrolling tweets late at night would reinforce a negative mood. My use of Twitter has recently changed since I have been a postgraduate student and it has become a positive social media platform for me. I think that this is because of where I currently am in my life, where reading widely and keeping up to date with the mainstream news is important to support my undergraduate teaching. I also use Twitter to gain knowledge of celebrities, follow funny comedians, and use digital distraction to create a positive form of emotional regulation

The Digital Canopy

One thing that many people seek in this world is meaning (King, Heintzelman, and Ward, 2016). Because of human mortality, people may need to understand where humans came from, why humans are here, and what happens after death (Routledge, 2014). A way to fill this search for meaning is often through religion (Berger, 1967). As Western society has become increasingly secularised, I argue that for increasing numbers of people, the search for meaning is filled with the abundance of social media. I find this particularly true for myself as I find community on social media and am not explicitly religious. In saying this, I am forced to consider myself as spiritual because I romanticise the aesthetics of images and find meaning/symbolism in images and photography, which may be why I use Instagram so much as it is a platform that allows me to romanticise visual information.

As Berger (1967) suggests, religion manifests to give meaning to people in a nihilistic world. I suggest social media has manifested to give meaning to people in an individualised world. In an ever-increasing individualistic world, individualism focuses on the self and personal development (Foley, 2015), whereas traditional explicit religions favour collectivism and focus on following a higher authority and social norms (Ibid). This highlights that in the ever-increasing secularised West, many people turn to individualised religions over traditional ones. The Western world's focus on individualism may turn people to social media as a New Religious Movement that reflects the New Age Californian Counterculture because it is all to do with the self as sacred, self-worship, alternative realities, and the self as the most authoritative source of knowledge (Heelas, 1996; Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994; Aupers and Houtman, 2006).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided some affordances of social media, an autoethnographic account of my own personal social media and smartphone use, and a discussion of themes related to the socio-political-cultural context that were Habitual and Ritualistic Behaviour, Community and Connections, Escapism, and The Digital Canopy.

Chapter Six: #Instafamous: Devotion, Divinity, and Deities

Introduction

Instagram is a visual-based social media platform⁴⁶ on which users can post photos, videos, and 'stories' that are only available to view for 24 hours (Read, 2019).⁴⁷ The most recent statistics for Instagram users were in April 2020, when Statista stated that Instagram had 845.5 million global users, which is estimated to jump to 988.1 million global users in 2023 (Clement, 2020). With Instagram and other social media platforms comes social media influencers who, according to Forbes (2020b) can be categorised into three levels, micro-celebrity⁴⁸, mid-level celebrity, and macro-celebrity. A micro-celebrity influencer has a following of anywhere between 5000 and 100,000 followers, a mid-level influencer has a following of anywhere between 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers, and a macro-celebrity influencer has over 1,000,000 followers (Forbes, 2020b). Social media influencers are people who have risen to fame solely through their use of social media, utilise their self as a brand, establish a sense of credibility from those who they influence, and gain cult followings (Enke and Borchers, 2019). As will be discussed, the way that these influencers gain cult followings and support from their followers mirrors the way people often follow a God/deity,⁴⁹ which I

⁴⁶ For a brief history of Instagram, see Chapter Four.

⁴⁷ As of July 2020, Instagram has also implemented a new feature 'reels' which are 15 second videos to compete with TikTok (Leskin, 2020). Instagram's algorithm is now showing more video content as a way for people to gain higher engagement from other users (Ibid).

⁴⁸ The term 'micro-celebrity' was first coined in 2001 by researcher Theresa M. Senft where she used the term to describe 'camgirls' as those who made use of online technologies to create a new-style of performance (Senft, 2008). The term 'micro-celebrity' is now commonly used to refer to social media influencers (Marwick, 2015).

⁴⁹ This is often synonymous with being part of a cult following. The term 'cult following' is used to refer to a fan base or group of people who are highly dedicated or devoted to some sort of media, for example, a film, book, music, or a video game, or alternatively, a religion (Price and Robinson, 2016). As social media influencers often gain cult followings, their mass audiences are devoted to spending time consuming content that they post on social media (Gómez, 2019).

argue can be understood as creating a situation whereby influencers can be understood as occupying a similar role to that of the totem in Durkheim's thought (Durkheim, 1912).

In applying Durkheim's theory to the 21st century and social media, I argue that devoting time to following social media influencers is a form of attachment to a totem. According to Durkheim (1912), a totem is an animal or plant that a group of people identifies with in comparison to other groups of people who use different animals or plants to identify with. Totems can become sacred and an entity that is worshipped by people who identify with it. A totem can also be a symbol of society without people even realising and a totem can become a materialist principle of God (Durkheim, 1912). Relating this to social media influencers, these influencers are totemic beings, not a replacement of God but a cult of saints that people attach themselves to, often to give themselves meaning to make sense of the world around them (Durkheim, 1912; Serazio, 2013). A social media user may follow multiple influencers where there is the creation of a pantheon of totems (Peltola, 2019), which means that social media may be generating a type of digital folk religion⁵⁰ that can be incorporated into existing religions or alongside existing religions (Johnson et al., 2013).

This chapter presents my findings from a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse a sample of Instagram influencers. The 10 influencers chosen are the most followed as of 2019 according to Influencer Marketing (2019). These influencers are detailed in Table 3. I outline how these Instagram influencers convey key attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture. For the purpose of this chapter, I begin with a reiteration of the New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics introduced in Chapter

⁵⁰ A folk religion (or popular religion) is a religion which falls outside of organised religion doctrines and can refer to how people experience/practice religion in their everyday lives (Johnson et al., 2013). This is very similar to implicit religions discussed in Chapter Three.

Three, then give a discussion of each Instagram influencer's net worth, discuss some significant overall themes, and finally give supporting analysis of each influencer using screenshots of their Instagram profiles. Between December 2019 and February 2020, I selected three images from each of the Instagram influencer's profiles for analysis using purposive sampling (Guarte and Barrios, 2006).

A Reiteration of New Age Californian Counterculture Characteristics

In Chapter Three I explored the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture. This section provides a reiteration of each characteristic I use to analyse the top 10 Instagram influencers as of 2019. These characteristics are as follows. The New Age Californian Counterculture is an individualised/personal pick and mix religion (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). Much of the New Age Californian Counterculture is about millennialism – the expectation that there is a better, new world to come; or an alternative reality to what is already available (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994). The self is sacred and can be worshipped, and a person's inner spirituality or inner God will lead to the new world/New Age (Heelas, 1996). The New Age Californian Counterculture is a system of worship and faith with an emphasis on the individual rather than the collective and when a person experiences transcendence, they will find their authentic self (Heelas and Houtman, 2009; Berger et al. 2001). The New Age Californian Counterculture is a Western Post-Protestant spirituality with a move away from traditional values into a global spiritual marketplace (Hodder, 2009).

Heelas's (1996) characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture are unmediated individualism – where the individual is their own authority; self-ethic – where one turns to alternative practices and is one's own moral compass; self-responsibility and magical power – where 'New Agers' are responsible for themselves; freedom – the ability to choose freely; and perennialism – where all the world's religions share a common truth. Tarcher's (1988) four attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture: our personal consciousness and everyday world are part of a divine reality; there is a concealed higher, authentic self within humans which is connected to the divine elements of the universe;

this higher self can be accessed and used as a guide for the individual; and accessing the higher self is the purpose of human life.

Sebald's (1984) identifiers of the New Age Californian Counterculture: it gives a sense of belonging; New Agers share common values with one significant value that the world needs fixing; there is a clear goal where New Agers have their own personalised package of beliefs; the New Age Californian Counterculture has a common style with an emphasis on transcendence and anti-materialism; and New Agers' heavily rely on mass communication technologies to broadcast information. The New Age Californian Counterculture is also an implicit religion that is unique but has no formal theology, structure, or explicit identity. Rather, the New Age Californian Counterculture is a social construction of identity where people can create their own personalised religion (Sutcliffe, 2002). Finally, it is a globalised religion where everything is interconnected through the dissemination of information and knowledge, predominantly through internet network spheres, suggesting that the internet can be thought of as part of the noosphere as suggested in Chapter Four (Gustin, 2013).

Influencer versus Celebrity – What’s the Difference?

Social media influencers are those who many everyday social media users want to follow, devote their time to, be entertained by, and often look to for advice and guidance (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Tsugawa and Kimura, 2018). With social media technologies constantly emerging, there has been a shift from traditional broadcast media into participatory media (Middaugh, Bowyer, and Kahne, 2017). Traditional celebrities such as actors, music artists, or politicians often use social media to add to their already existing influence, whereas social media influencers are those who use social media to create and maintain celebrity status (Marwick, 2015). Social media influencers are lesser-known to the wider population, but they are still considered ‘entities’ or ‘deities’, as many social media users invest in and follow them (O’Meara, 2019). Like the New Age Californian Counterculture and social media platforms, the notion of ‘celebrity’ is something that can take on new forms throughout time and across platforms with people responding to changing interests and platforms. McDonnell and Douglas (2019, p.7) suggest “Fame is not an immutable phenomenon, but rather one that has emerged, proliferated, persisted, and changed thanks to evolving technological, cultural, and ideological mechanisms.”

Instagram’s algorithm is beneficial to influencers as it personalises a user’s feed – the more likes or engagement content receives, the longer it stays relevant at the top of the feeds (Cotter, 2019). The more engagement an influencer obtains from their followers, the more likely they are to increase their follower count (Ibid). An interaction from an influencer’s audience of followers such as a like or comment can be perceived as a type of

devotional act towards the influencer (O'Meara, 2019).⁵¹ This bears similarity to devotional activities associated with traditional acts of religious piety such as prayer, scripture reading, and sharing faith with friends and family (Stroope, 2012).

Social media influencers tend to provide 'performative intimacy' on their social media profiles (Yuan and Lou, 2020). This is where an influencer provides "seemingly" intimate behind-the-scenes glimpses of their everyday lives. Carefully crafting and curating a sense of intimacy, vulnerability, and closeness creates para-social relationships between an influencer and their followers (Bond, 2016). A para-social relationship is a psychological relationship experienced by an audience member where they view performers in the media as friends, or as if the person in the audience has some sort of connection with performers,⁵² where there is often an illusory reciprocal relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This type of familiarity, closeness, vulnerability, and intimate knowledge of an influencer helps sustain their status as an influencer and means that their followers are more likely to feel connected to them as a totemic being (Yuan and Lou, 2020; Bond 2016; Durkheim, 1912).

⁵¹ O'Meara (2019) also suggests that there are engagement pods on Instagram where communities of people mutually agree to like, share, comment, or engage in a particular way with each other's Instagram posts, no matter what the content is, in order to combat Instagram's algorithm, meaning more people will likely be exposed to content with the more engagement the content gains.

⁵² Performers can be mainstream celebrities, social media influencers, or fictional characters (Bond, 2016).

Table 3: Top 10 Instagram Influencers 2019, discussed in this chapter

Influencer	@	Follower Count (2019)	When Influencer Began Instagram	Synopsis	Estimated Net Worth
Huda Kattan	@hudabeauty	41.4M	2012	Makeup artistry, blogging	\$US 610 Million (Forbes, 2019)
Zach King	@zachking	22.8M	2013	Vlogging	\$US 3.5 Million (Kinghaze, n.d)
Cameron Dallas	@camerondallas	21.3M	2011	Vlogging, self- transformation	\$US 4.5 Million (Gani, 2020)
Chiara Ferragni	@chiaraFerrangi	18.5M	2010	Fashion blogger, beauty	\$US 10 Million (Prasad, 2020)

James Charles	@jamescharles	16.4M	2015	Makeup artistry, vlogging	\$US 12 Million (Wallin, 2020)
Nikkie de Jager	@nikkietutorials	13.8M	2011	Makeup artistry, vlogging	\$US 6 Million (Herbert, 2020)
Michelle Lewin	@michelle_lewin	13.6M	2014	Fitspo, tutorials	\$US 4 Million (Debnath, 2019)
Kayla Itsines	@kayla_itsines	12.2M	2012	Fitspo, healthy living, self-care, self-transformation, food, travel	\$US 48 Million (combined with her ex-partner, \$486 Million) (Bode, 2018)

Nash Grier	@nashgrier	10.4M	2012	Vlogging, photography	\$US 3 Million (Vrz, 2020)
Camila Coelho	@camilacoelho	8.6M	2010	Style influencer, beauty, vlogging	\$US 2.8 Million (Worth, 2020)

Table 3 shows the influencer's name, their Instagram username, follower count as of 2019, the year they began using Instagram, a synopsis of what they post online, and their net worth.

Net Worth Discussion

Table 3 states each influencer's status by their estimated net worth. In comparison to how many followers each influencer has in relation to wealth, bar Huda Kattan, there is a significant difference. From this arises a few questions that must be unpacked: Why are makeup and fashion influencers worth more? Why are Kayla Itsines and her ex-partner worth so much? Which influencers use social media just to make money rather than share their passions with their communities? What are the gender politics/underpinnings of this? To unpack these four questions, I give the following suggestions:

In regards to the New Age Californian Counterculture, makeup and fashion are two ways that people can transform themselves or express themselves authentically (McCabe, de Waal Malelyft, and Fabri, 2017). By putting on makeup, a person can change or enhance the way their face looks, or by changing clothing styles, a person may be able to feel like a completely different person or more in tune with themselves/who they want to be (Berg, 2008).

One explanation as to why makeup influencers such as Huda Kattan, James Charles, and Nikkie de Jager are worth so much is that with an increasingly visual culture, image economy, and socio-technical environment, it may be perceived as important for many people to wear makeup and enhance the way the self looks (Gannon and Prothero, 2016). This emphasises the 'always-on' and 'camera ready' society the Western world has become (Rocamora, 2017). According to Biron (2019), cosmetics companies benefit from social media influencers who use their products, which is one explanation for why Huda Kattan is worth so much, as she sells her own products under 'Huda Beauty' (Kattan, 2020). As many of her followers perceive that they have a parasocial relationship with Kattan, they are more

likely to buy her products and tell their friends about her brand through word of mouth (Hu and Kim, 2018). As of 2020, the beauty revenue in the US is currently 49.2 billion dollars, with eye makeup products such as mascara and eyeliner having the highest number of transactions per capita (Shahbandeh, 2020).

In regards to fashion influencers, James Charles, Chiara Ferragni, and Camila Coelho are analysed in this chapter, with Charles and Ferragni being worth significantly more than Coelho. Social media platforms such as Instagram have changed the way the fashion industry operates. For example, fashion weeks used to be events for the elite of society, but with the introduction of social media, a democratization of fashion week has occurred, meaning that instead of waiting for six months for a collection to drop in stores, designers have to adapt and deliver fashion instantly online (Andersson and Jandér, 2016). Fashion designers and influencers also now have to think about how images of fashion will appear on social media platforms such as Instagram – as there is only so much content one can post in a small picture (Rocamora, 2017). The use of Instagram also means that a brand can communicate its images, videos, latest trends, behind-the-scenes content, and live content to a much broader audience which can increase fashion revenue substantially (Andersson and Jandér, 2016). Chiara Ferragni was the first fashion influencer to appear on the cover of American *Vogue* in 2015, which may have helped boost her career (Hund, 2017). She also starred in *Project Runway*⁵³ as a guest judge in 2014 (Reed, 2014) and her shoe line and blog were both case studies at Harvard Business School in 2015 (Garnsworthy, 2015). Most of her revenue today comes from her own fashion collection (Prasad, 2020). James Charles's revenue has been acquired from sponsored posts on YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, as

⁵³ *Project Runway* (2004 – 2017) was an American reality television show where fashion designers compete with one another to create the best clothing (IMDB 2004 –).

well as from his 'sisters' apparel brand and collaborations with 'Morphe' (Eaton, 2020).

Camila Coelho's net worth may be so much lower because she has not done anything other than social media and her fashion blog, and does not tend to show as many private affairs or get involved in drama like other influencers have done, so may have less para-social relationships/interactions with her followers.

Kayla Itsines and her ex-fiancé Tobi Pearce are worth \$486 million combined and Itsines is worth \$48 million on her own. Itsines's revenue comes mostly from her app 'Sweat with Kayla' (Gaulhiac and Moynihan, 2018). A potential reason for Itsines being worth so much is that she focuses heavily on the progress of her followers as well as her own individual progress. A lot of Itsines's exercise regimes are designed to empower women, help women speak and communicate with one another, and also track each other's progress. This is done in a members-only 'Sweat with Kayla' forum that is location-based, so followers can connect with one another in close proximity to work out together, and has been dubbed 'Kayla's Army' (Doe, 2020). This suggests that Kayla Itsines has a lot of charisma and passion for fitness, which is interrelated with both community and capital and her social and cultural capital is intrinsically linked to the accumulation of economic capital (Bourdieu, 2005). Itsines's applications were cofounded by her ex-fiancé Tobi Pearce, meaning that their combined income from 'Sweat with Kayla' and 'Bikini Body Guides' and Pearce's own digital marketing agency 'Pearce and co.' makes them worth so much (Gaulhiac and Moynihan, 2018).

Kayla Itsines is an influencer who uses Instagram and other social media platforms to share her passion for fitness and self-transformation/self-improvement as well as for capital gain. I also suggest that Huda Kattan, Chiara Ferragni, Nikkie de Jager, and Camila Coelho

share their self-brands on social media as they have a genuine passion for makeup or fashion. In contrast, due to all the controversy that James Charles has created, as outlined below in the analysis section, he appears to be using social media just to make money,⁵⁴ which is also evident from the fact he does sponsored posts on YouTube. This can also be said for Michelle Lewin who has also been the centre of many social media controversies. As for Cameron Dallas and Nash Grier, they seem to post more seemingly intimate private moments to their Instagram, giving them more perceived authenticity and this may mean they are using social media to gain community and connection over revenue. Finally, Zach King wants to share knowledge and offer escapism to his followers and so may not be using social media solely for revenue. King still sells comics to earn money, so all of these influencers are using social media to gain revenue, just to different degrees.

The final issue I want to address here is the gender politics/underpinnings of the differences in net worth. Most of the women are higher in net worth than the men.⁵⁵ This could be attributed to the fact that women tend to use social media more than men (Pew Research Center, 2019) and that women are more likely to be influencers on social media (Guttmann, 2020). Moreover, women are more likely to post more intimate content than men are and tend to prefer visual platforms such as Instagram over text-based platforms like Reddit – which is a type of platform men prefer to use (Atanasova, 2016a). This highlights that women may find it easier to create and maintain para-social relationships with their followers meaning that they will likely uphold their status, credibility, and authenticity longer than men, and create higher revenue in doing so (Sing and Sonnenburg,

⁵⁴ This could also be a genuine passion to acquire revenue.

⁵⁵ This contradicts the idea of the gender pay gap, where women are paid less than men in mainstream forms of employment (Auspurg, Hinz, and Sauer, 2017).

2012; Lee and Eastin, 2020). This is consistent with traditional gender norms, where women tend to be stereotyped as more caring, motherly, and submissive (Drake, Primeaux, and Thomas, 2018).

Significant Overall Themes

Through applying the New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics to the top 10 Instagram influencers, some significant themes emerged. This analysis is presented following this discussion of significant overall themes. These are Totems, Selfies, and Relatability, Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity, Commodification of Self, and Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism. These themes are discussed below.

Totems, Selfies, and Relatability

As mentioned, totems are collective symbols that represent both God and society and are often an entity that people attach themselves to, usually to find meaning to make sense of the self and the larger world (Durkheim, 1912). I suggest that social media influencers, in particular, Instagram influencers are similar to Durkheim's totems, as they intentionally create and manipulate situations, so they get their followers to devote time to liking, commenting, and following their content on social media. One way that many Instagram influencers do this online is by posting selfies. Selfies are images taken of oneself, usually on a smartphone, which are then posted online (Senft and Baym, 2015). All 10 Instagram influencers that I analyse in this chapter post selfies on their Instagram account to help give their followers a sense of their lives that is curated on social media. As they are all creating and uploading content of themselves online, I argue that this means they all think (at least, implicitly) of themselves as sacred and want their followers to as well, in order to maintain engagement from their followers (Heelas, 1996; Santarossa et al., 2019). Senft and Baym (2015) suggest that selfies are a way to communicate with audience members, such as followers on social media, to convey particular meanings and messages to them. Two

examples of selfies from my analysis of Instagram influencers below will be seen with Chiara Ferragni in image 11 and Michelle Lewin in image 21.

Image 11.



Image 21.



In image 11, Ferragni has taken a picture of herself with her smartphone of a night out, which demonstrates Heelas's (1996) New Age Californian Counterculture characteristic of self-worship. The use of selfies demonstrates Heelas's (1996) self-worship claim with specific examples explored further in this analysis. In image 21, Michelle Lewin has also taken a selfie with her smartphone, where she is advertising her own self-brand 'M ELLE' with product placement of her phone case, which also demonstrates Heelas's (1996) self-worship claim.

Being relatable and providing intimate glimpses of their everyday lives, is one particular way that influencers become totems people devote time to consuming. If a follower feels like they are connected to, or can relate to an influencer, they are more likely to follow that influencer and buy their products (Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Cotter, 2019). By sharing ‘normal, everyday mundane’ things, influencers let their followers know they are just people too, making a living, but on social media. As will be shown further in this chapter, Huda Kattan, Cameron Dallas, and Nash Grier all do this. Consumers (followers) often feel that they can relate to someone who defines themselves as ‘normal’, rather than someone of high status and wealth (Ibid). Social media users may find it easier to relate to influencers over celebrities. It may be easier to feel connected to someone such as Huda Kattan or Cameron Dallas over celebrities Kim Kardashian – who has 173 million Instagram followers⁵⁶ or Beyoncé – who has 147 million Instagram followers⁵⁷ (Sokolova and Kevi, 2020).

Although both Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé can be viewed as Instagram influencers their celebrity status has come due to other factors, not just from social media platforms. Kim Kardashian was born into the already famous Kardashian family and gained media attention and recognition after her sex tape with rapper Ray J was released in 2007 (Page Six Team, 2020). In the same year, the reality television show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* that focuses on the Kardashian-Jenner family’s personal and professional lives began (IMDB, 2007 - 2020). Beyoncé’s career began as the lead singer in the American girl group Destiny’s Child following after with her own music, dancing, acting, and producing career (Hayward, 2020). Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé utilise Instagram and other social

⁵⁶ (Kardashian-West, 2020).

⁵⁷ (Beyoncé, 2020).

media platforms to add to their already existing influence, whereas social media influencers such as Huda Kattan, specifically use social media platforms to reach influencer or celebrity status (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, 2020). A social media user wanting to follow Huda Kattan and Cameron Dallas over Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé may most likely be due to the influencers coming across as easier to relate to than celebrities are. I personally find this true for myself.

One other explanation as to why so many people follow such Instagram influencers is because they all fit into different focuses, which can provide benefits for their followers, which often increases their relatability (McDonnell and Douglas, 2019). For example, if an Instagram user is interested in makeup, they can follow Huda Kattan, Nikkie de Jager, or James Charles. If an Instagram user wants to be entertained, they can follow Zach King, Cameron Dallas, or Nash Grier. If an Instagram user is interested in fitness, they can follow Michelle Lewin or Kayla Itsines, and if an Instagram user is interested in fashion, they can follow Chiara Ferragni or Camila Coelho. This means that an Instagram user or everyday social media user can have multiple totems that they may gain meaning and other needs from (Durkheim, 1912; Kircaburun and Griffiths, 2019). These 10 Instagram influencers may also be perceived as more relatable to wider audiences as they make it acceptable to deviate from Western ideals/social norms.

Celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Kanye West, and Beyoncé can be considered 'mega totems' to whom many users devote their time in watching, liking, and following, in a similar way to how people follow Instagram influencers. However, they may not always be using social media technologies to do so. Some examples could be watching *Keeping up with the Kardashians* when it is on as a form of secular ritual, or following Kanye West's Sunday

Service Choir – an American Gospel group that performs every Sunday as a form of religion or devotional activity (Darville, 2019). Or keeping up to date with Beyoncé Mass – a womanist worship service that uses Beyoncé’s music and personal life to empower women of colour (Beyoncé Mass, n.d.). I claim that these celebrities are using their celebrity status to advertise other forms of religion rather than being a part of the New Age Californian Counterculture, as they already have existing influence.

Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity

The influencers who have a large number of followers and are successful businesspeople are able to give the impression that they are authentic (Wellman et al., 2020). Representations of the self are strongly embedded online, as well as in the New Age Californian Counterculture, which argues that there are many different ways to express the self (Heelas, 1996). The 10 Instagram influencers I analyse in this chapter express the self as ‘authentic’, as they represent themselves in a way that is perceived to be real by their followers (Fosco, 2014). To do this, influencers market themselves as the brand they are selling. This means it is not about the external products they are selling, but about the self. Or rather, products sold through the commodification of self, such as makeup, clothes, or fitness. The influencers I analyse in this chapter are selling their selves as a brand and their brands as extensions of self, and to do so effectively, they must appear authentic. Otherwise, influencers will be at risk of being called fake or inauthentic, potentially losing their follower count (Cunningham and Craig, 2017). By presenting themselves as sacred and encouraging devotion to their Instagram profiles, influencers become contemporary totemic beings that their followers want to worship (Heelas, 1996; Durkheim, 1912). Examples of how Instagram influencers appear authentic online are interacting with followers (Lee and

Eastin, 2020), being open and honest (Fosco, 2014), crediting others work (Lim, 2018), and posing with animals to give an impression a person is selfless, kind, and caring (Fosco, 2014). Through the use of these manipulative techniques, the influencers are creating a sense of realness for their followers. Interacting with followers also increases relational trust and mediates the credibility of an influencer (Yang and Lim, 2009; Reinikainen et al., 2020). This is most evident in Huda Kattan's Instagram use, where she connects with her followers by sharing other makeup artists' looks (Kattan, 2020). Sharing other makeup artists' looks encourages Kattan's followers to perceive her as likeable, helping her gain new followers, more customers, and higher revenue as well as capital gain.

One contradiction of authenticity presented in these example influencers is evident with Zach King. King comes across as authentic as he is making his own brand rather than selling other people's products, however, in creating this world King uses illusions, which are 'unreal' (Fish, 2009). This begs the questions, what is real? What do people in society think is real? Is he more authentic by being unreal? Is King defying traditional social media norms to create content? Gilmore and Pine (2007) suggest that people often see the world through a real versus unreal binary due to the 'experience economy'. This economy is where consumers want experiences – memorable events that engage them and do so in a personalised manner, like how Instagram's algorithm works (Cotter, 2019; Hu et al., 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Even though King provides 'unreal' or hyperreal experiences, they are still memorable and offer more than just a goods-services exchange for many of his followers. According to Shambler (2019), King performs magic tricks on social media because he wants to entertain his followers. I suggest that King may be intrinsically motivated rather than externally motivated by offering entertainment rather than pure commodity to his followers (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2018). Marwick and Boyd

(2011) argue that authenticity is a social construct, and in these examples, King's magic illusions are constructed as a form of authenticity, while for fashion bloggers, an outfit that reflects personal aesthetic appears authentic, and for makeup influencers, showing the self without makeup may be 'authentic' (Duffy and Hund, 2019).

There are also many risks of inauthenticity on social media, which can often decrease devotion from an influencer's audience (Cunningham and Craig, 2017). According to Mkono (2020), inauthenticity means someone who is not being objectively true to one's own standards, usually with some form of hypocrisy where they do not hold the same morals for themselves that they do for others. One way that audiences (followers) of social media influencers may perceive the influencer as inauthentic is if external processes such as reward or punishment motivate them (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020). Another way this is often seen is by sponsored posts, where an influencer is paid to endorse a particular product that is not their own (Ibid). James Charles is one of the example influencers who has done sponsored posts in the past; however, he still sells his own brand 'sisters'. As the influencers in this analysis tend to sell their own self-brands, they appear more authentic to their followers as by selling their own products, creates higher credibility and trust (Luoma-aho et al., 2019).

Commodification of Self

The commodification of self and digital capitalism is evident in these Instagram influencers. The self-branding that these influencers do demands feedback from their followers, as without a following, there would be little to no feedback or engagement (Hu et al., 2020). Instagram and other social media platforms are technologies used for engagement, which helps strengthen the visibility of content (Cotter, 2019). Instagram

influencers in today's attention economy gain higher social capital and social status through self-commodification (Reade, 2020).

Neoliberal digital capitalism is also strongly evident in these Instagram influencers. They are employing their own self-brands as a capitalist transaction of goods and services. Their followers are their consumers, and they themselves are the product (Pace, 2018; Fuchs, 2018). For example, Chiara Ferragni posts images wearing her own clothing on Instagram showing that she is commodifying herself in order to sell her product (Ferragni, 2020). When Instagram influencers sell their own products rather than sponsored content, it can promote trust, engagement, and positive word of mouth (Luoma-aho et al., 2019). In turn, they are often deemed more authentic. If an influencer is deemed inauthentic by falsifying something, sponsoring something, or reciting a script, it means they are less likely to gain engagement and as many followers (Ibid).

Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism

Instagram influencers such as Huda Kattan and Camila Coelho become totems of consumer culture through the Instagram image, which is a shift into visual piety over sacred text (Morgan, 1998). According to Sheffield (2006), advertising is not a religion, but something that contains totemic dimensions. Firstly, advertising has a divine mediator who creates advertisements for consumers, and consumers become part of the consumption community. An example of this is the Rolex watch, which is associated with wealth and prestige. When a person purchases a Rolex, they become part of the Rolex community mediated by the advertisement of an image. Therefore, advertising creates culture. Secondly, Sheffield (2006, p.3) suggests that advertising through images has "religious dimensions of sacramentality akin to transubstantiation." In a likeness to how bread and

wine represent body and blood in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, the object is transformed into a symbol that represents society as a consumer culture. In applying Sheffield's theory to Instagram, the divine mediator is the influencer where the image is used to advertise a brand and represents society as a consumer culture.

Through the digital age and social media/user-generated content, advertisement saturation, and a post-secular society, many people yearn for something to believe in (Corner, 2002). This is where brands, in this case, Instagram influencers' self-brands like Huda Kattan's 'Huda Beauty', Zach King's illusions, Cameron Dallas' jokes, Chiara Ferragni's 'Chiara Ferragni Collection', James Charles' 'sisters', Nikkie de Jager's 'NikkieTutorials', Michelle Lewin's fitness training and apparel brand 'M ELLE', Kayla Itsines' fitness training and app 'Sweat with Kayla', Nash Grier's life, and Camila Coelho's 'Camila Coelho Collection' are the content that social media users consume. Social media users consume many of these brands as well as creating their own, which encourages influencer's audience members to become their own totem and extension of selves (Durkheim, 1912; Belk 2013). In line with how Ferguson (1981) claimed that there was a paradigm shift in society in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, social media, especially Instagram, has changed the way businesses operate, and how people consume advertising. An expression of this is the fictionalised origin of the 'buy the world a coke' campaign at the end of the television series *Mad Men* – a show based around Don Draper and advertising (IMDB, 2007 - 2015). Draper took many of his life cues and morals from advertising, especially Coca Cola, as he wanted to portray himself and his family as the perfect, idealised version that he could, capitalising on the idea of the American dream (Tudor, 2012). In the finale of *Mad Men* Draper is attending a Californian utopian New Age community where it is implied, he reaches enlightenment by

coming up with the idea for the Coca Cola advertisement.⁵⁸ This advertisement represents a symbolic rebirth at the beginning of the 1970s where America was ready for social change and to shift into utopian values (Brayson, 2019; The Take, 2019). An experiment conducted in the 1980s with Coca Cola and Pepsi showed how consumers prefer certain brands to others due to the brand's advertising techniques (Roberts, 2004). In a blind taste testing of both sodas, Pepsi was the preferred taste. However, since the 1980s Coca Cola has dominated the American market for soft drinks because of how it is branded – that is, as something that is supposed to remind consumers of family, friendship, and utopian values (Yglesias, 2013). In contemporary society, advertising is all about understanding and connecting with the individual. Products and services are now hyper-personalised where the consumer is constructed/portrayed as the one who is in control (Stephens, 2013).

⁵⁸ The original coke campaign was created by Bill Backer, who said that the idea for this advertisement was so that people would “see Coke not as it was originally designed to be – a liquid refresher – but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples, a universally liked formula that would help to keep them company for a few minutes” (Nurdyke, 2015). Like the aim of Coca Cola, to bring people together in commonality, social media influencers, are bringing people together online to help create community, connection, belonging, and togetherness (Boyd 2014). A few examples of how the influencers analysed in this chapter do this are as follows. Huda Kattan does this by sharing content from smaller makeup artists accounts (Kattan, 2020). Cameron Dallas gives his followers a sense of community by uploading videos of pranks he does with his friends (Dallas, 2020), and James Charles does this by creating his own sisterhood through his apparel brand ‘sisters’ (Charles, 2020).

A Textual Analysis of Instagram Influencers using Visual Analysis Techniques

This section discusses the top 10 Instagram influencers, gives a brief synopsis of each influencer, and analyses three purposively selected images from each of their profiles by applying the New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics to them to see if these influencers reflect elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Huda Kattan

Synopsis

Huda Kattan⁵⁹ (1983 -) is an Iraqi-American makeup artist, beauty blogger, and influencer. Kattan was born in Oklahoma, and has lived in Tennessee, Massachusetts, Los Angeles, and Dubai (Schaefer, 2016). Kattan studied finance and began her WordPress blog 'Huda Beauty' in 2010, where she posted makeup tutorials and beauty tips (Ibid). She also has her own website with the same name (Ibid). In 2013, she founded her own cosmetics line, and French makeup company Sephora released her first pair of false eyelashes. The success of Kattan's first pair of false eyelashes came because Kim Kardashian (1980 -) wore them (McClear, 2017). Alongside Instagram, Kattan also uses Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube.

On Instagram, Kattan posts beauty tips, makeup tutorials, do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, product reviews, advertises her cosmetics line and clientele, what she volunteers for, advocates continuous self-care, self-transformation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement; giving a lot of emphasis towards positive self-esteem (Kattan, 2020). Kattan's emphasis on the 'self' expresses the concept of the 'neoliberal self', where neoliberalism

⁵⁹ Kattan also identifies as Muslim (McClear, 2017).

calls for individuals to think of their lives like a business, enterprise, or company; that is, to commodify the self (Foucault and Senellart, 2008). This creates an “enterprise culture” (Scharff, 2015), whereby the ‘neoliberal self’ is about relating to oneself as a business, embracing and taking risks, portraying oneself as capable, redirecting the desire for change from the social sphere into a personal sphere, embracing self-critique over social critique, being vulnerable, and competing against oneself; not just others (Ibid). This neoliberal self is about always improving oneself and encouraging growth. Kattan expresses the neoliberal self by commodifying herself online.

Lim (2018) suggests five major reasons as to why Kattan is a significant social media influencer. These are: She posts photos of herself with no makeup on and memes making fun of herself which expresses that she is content with laughing at herself and also does this to encourage people to follow her makeup advice, showing her followers how they, too, can be transformed; Kattan is relatable to her audience, presenting herself as wacky, and unconventional. For example, Kattan has used personal lubricant as a makeup primer; she actively supports the makeup community by posting other content from up-and-coming makeup artists to give them support and recognition; she reviews many products and has a range of 30 different foundation types; and Kattan does not post sponsored content.⁶⁰

Kattan is listed as number #36 on the *2019 America’s Self-Made Women Net Worth List* (Forbes, 2019). Her success, fortune, and fame began with beauty blogging, meaning that Kattan has always used social media as a marketing tool and place for capital gain, and has done so in a way that constantly emphasises community, connection, and authenticity

⁶⁰ Posting sponsored content implies the influencer is only participating in the use of Instagram for capital gain rather than community (Wellman et al., 2020).

(Boyd, 2014a; Costin and Vignoles, 2020). Without Kattan's use of social media, I suggest that she would not have been as successful as she is today.

In an increasingly competitive digital capitalist society, Kattan also had to compete with Kylie Jenner's makeup brand, wherein 2015, Kattan was about to release her own lip kits, but Jenner did it first (Tsintziras, 2019). Kattan then decided to release hers in 2016 (Ibid). Kylie Jenner (1997 -) is an American media personality and businesswoman who founded her own cosmetics company *Kylie Cosmetics* in 2015. She also stars in the reality television show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007 -) (Forbes, 2020a). Jenner's current net worth is US\$900 million, which is a significantly higher amount than Huda Kattan's net worth of US\$610 million (Peterson-Withorn and Berg, 2020; Forbes, 2019). Even though Jenner has 178 million Instagram followers (Jenner, 2020), she is not included as one of the chosen Instagram influencers for this thesis. Frangoss (2018) claims that Jenner's privileged upbringing in the Kardashian family and starring in their television shows has helped with her success. Due to the advantage of already having a following, Jenner was likely not self-made through social media.

Analysis

Before applying some of the attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture to analysing Kattan's Instagram, it is important to re-establish that Kattan is a Muslim (McClear, 2017). While the attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture are evident in Kattan's Instagram, her Muslim faith forbids idolatry – the worship of anything or anyone other than Allah (Hawting, 1999). While this thesis applies the New Age Californian Counterculture to Kattan's Instagram, it cannot be said that this applies to how her Muslim followers view or use her Instagram.

'Huda Beauty' is Kattan's own new world, her paradise she has created because she was dissatisfied with her previous one (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994). Kattan was unhappy with her recruitment job in Michigan, and in agreement with her husband, decided that they should move to Dubai. There, Kattan gained a public relations job that she quit just after two weeks in order to follow her passion for makeup. In doing so, she created her company 'Huda Beauty' which has gained significant success (Hutcheson, 2018).

Image 1. An advertisement for a new launch of pastel lilac-coloured palettes where Kattan is hanging inside a claw machine with purple and lilac soft toy unicorns and teddy bears and is wearing lilac-coloured clothing (Kattan, 2020).



In image 1, Kattan herself has digitally transcended into the claw machine in order to choose a soft toy out of the claw machine as an advertisement for her makeup palettes that launched on the 1st March 2020 (Kattan, 2020). By digitally transcending her conceptual self into the claw machine, Kattan demonstrates Sebald's (1984) concept of transcendence. The palettes were advertised on her Instagram two weeks prior to this date in order to tease her audience about them (Kattan, 2020). This gives the impression that the products are almost ready-to-grasp, but consumers still have to wait before they can purchase them, which could make people want something more than they originally did (Sreejesh et al., 2020).

Instagram influencers such as Huda Kattan continuously accumulate wealth, capital, and engagement from their followers to maintain their status.

Image 2. An image of Kattan wearing a sparkly pink dress before a party in front of her wall of magazine covers that she has been featured on. Kattan previously asked her followers to come up with a caption for this photo where the winning caption says “When you know there are going to be snacks at the party and show up looking like a MEAL 🍷🔥” – (Kattan, 2020).



In image 2, I argue that Kattan is presenting herself as a commodity to be consumed, which connects with McGuire’s (2017) research on the performance of gender on Instagram. McGuire (2017) claims that women will often hyper-sexualise themselves as a response against the feminist notion that women can have it all. When women do hyper-sexualise themselves online, on social media, it is often done purposefully, and “they are complicit in their own objectification to obtain power” (McGuire, 2017, p.51). I suggest Kattan is objectifying herself in this image in two ways. The first is that she is agreeing with her followers by posting the caption that says she looks like a ‘meal’. The second is the particular pose she is doing appears as if she wants her followers to look at her, and by doing this, she obtains her status as a powerful woman in the influencer industry (Kattan, 2020).

In image 2 Kattan is also engaging with her followers by asking them to come up with a caption for her post (Kattan, 2020). This gives her followers the impression that they are part of her Instagram and accordingly, her life. It may make her followers feel involved, important, and worthy, which also helps to increase authenticity (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Standing in front of a wall of framed images of her on magazine covers represents a gallery of success and suggests that Kattan may be worshipping herself (Heelas, 1996). Additionally, this is similar to how the New Age Californian Counterculture emphasises individualism and self-improvement (Heelas and Houtman, 2009) where Kattan is telling her own story of self-improvement and presenting an idealised version of herself. This supports the idea that social media is where users curate and express an image of their authentic selves, which is hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994).

Image 3. An image of Kattan advertising a popup store in London that Kattan was in the process of creating at the time (Kattan, 2020).



By sitting on a throne in front of a pink Christmas tree in image 3, Kattan while a Muslim, is using a commodified version of a Christian religious festival to sell herself and her products as seasonal commodities. This reflects Heelas's (1996) concept that the self is sacred and can be worshipped. From this, Kattan's followers may perceive her as worthy of

great respect and devotion and emphasises her as a totem of contemporary society (Durkheim, 1912). This is problematic in two ways. The first is that Kattan is Muslim, so she would probably not celebrate the Christian holiday Christmas, and the second is that she is portraying herself as a totem, which as aforementioned, is forbidden in Islam (Hawting, 1999). Kattan is defying certain social norms and traditions for her own capital gain and exploitation of her follower's time and money. In keeping with Aupers and Houtman's (2006) claim that the New Age Californian Counterculture is a pick and mix religion, Kattan is also choosing which representations of self to portray on Instagram to connect with her followers and is using Western concepts to do so.

The New Age Californian Counterculture characteristic of a new world or alternative reality is represented in Kattan's Instagram through makeup. Kattan's Instagram presents an alternative reality from her Islamic faith. In this alternative reality, Kattan uses makeup in a manner similar to that of the traditional Christian altar call – that is, those who wish to come forward publicly to make a new spiritual commitment, and makeup becomes the evangelising call via social media, that is, a way to convert others into her community (Krupp, 2015). From this makeup world, Kattan gains both social and economic capital from her followers, who I argue many will be gaining a sense of belonging and community by following her, as Sebald (1984) suggests are two elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Zach King

Synopsis

Zach King (1990 -) is a Chinese American blogger who currently resides in Los Angeles. King currently uses social media platforms YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram with his speciality being unconventional and non-traditional magic tricks. Most of these tricks are based on clever editing skills, but some still use traditional sleight-of-hand. King began his social media career by creating tutorials for video editing software, as he was unable to find any online at the time. With the introduction of Vine in 2013, King moved into illusions (Shambler, 2019). Between 2011 and 2014, King posted a video trilogy of Jedi kittens fighting with lightsabres on YouTube, which has contributed to his current success (Snow, 2015). King refers to himself as an entertainer/influencer who wants to connect people through magic, offer escapism for his followers when needed, spread joy, happiness, and inspiration through magical content, which are New Age Californian Countercultural elements, and do this without the restraints of real-time or geographical barriers (Shambler, 2019; Lane, 2015).

Analysis

King's Instagram reflects the New Age Californian Counterculture because he is mixing traditional and non-traditional magic tricks and heavily relies on mass technology do to so (Sebald, 1984). By relying on the internet and other technology in this way, King is connecting people through a network of magic spheres where he encourages his followers to congregate online, resembling church-going behaviour (Gustin, 2013; Blanchard, Stroope, and Tolbert, 2014).

Image 4. A video of Zach King eating an apple out of the famous painting 'The Son of Man' (King, 2020).



This idea is further emphasised by image 4 which is a video of King performing a magic trick where he takes the apple out of the famous painting 'The Son of Man' by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte (1898 – 1967) and puts it back again (Chernick, 2018; King, 2020). Magritte's painting is a self-portrait that represents the conflict where everything that people see is hiding something else, and that people always want to see the 'what' that is hidden (Chernick, 2018; Zalman, 2012). Regarding King's magic tricks, this conflict may be emphasised as his followers are captured by his magic, but followers do not see all the behind-the-scenes work, even though they might want to. Hypothetically, if this was not an illusion, and someone could actually pull the apple out of 'The Son of Man' and put it back in, people would likely feel disoriented and that their senses were distorted. As this magic trick is communicated through social media, it gives people entertainment, excitement, and escapism (Coughlan, 2019). King's Instagram provides New Age Californian Counterculture escapism⁶¹, magic, and entertainment, as well as keeping his followers wanting more magical/illusory content because he offers an alternative reality that people can turn to

⁶¹ For many people, escapism through digital technologies is one way that they can ignore (either for brief moments or long periods) the dark realities and uncertainties in their lives. When someone chooses to escape, they often feel as if they have more self-control in their lives and may be inspired to explore self-expression and in turn, reach self-actualisation in the process (Kemp, 2017).

which offers escapism from real life. I propose this is one reason why King has so many Instagram followers.

Image 5. A magic trick loop video where King plays the game 'hot potato' catching the potato through his iPad (King, 2020).



The New Age Californian Counterculture facilitates a post-religious re-enchantment of magic through technology and capitalism (Neusner, Frierichs, and Flesher, 1992), which is expressed in King's Instagram. Many religions, such as Christianity, have been opposed to magic, based on the belief that magic had powers attributable to supernatural forces (Durkheim, 1912). In contrast, even today some conservative Christians reject magic in popular culture and mass media, for example, viewing the popular culture phenomenon Harry Potter as satanic (Soulliere, 2010). King defies 'traditional' Christian ideas of magic and demonstrates aspects of the New Age Californian Counterculture in images 4 and 5, which are the self-ethic and magical power (Heelas, 1996). King's magic is characteristic of the self-ethic because he is using alternative, non-conventional forms of magic (digital forms), which he may do by following his own voice of authority to intuitively figure out what works best for him and his followers. Magical power is also expressed here, as King has no divine

intervention from a higher power, as the New Age Californian Counterculture is all about worshipping the self as a divine power (Heelas, 1996).

Image 6. Zach King holding his comic book creation (King, 2020).



The final two characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture that I argue are evident in King's Instagram are Tarcher's (1988) higher authentic self and Sutcliffe's (2002) social construction of identity and personal religion. Image 6 highlights both these characteristics as it is an advertisement for King's comic book based on a middle-school-aged character called Zach in search of his own supernatural powers and in real life, Zach is in search of illusory powers. Those who purchase these comics can download an Augmented Reality (AR) application where the character Zach comes to life (King, 2020). This suggests that the AR version of King is his concealed higher authentic self, or his gnostic self, which both King and his followers can access through an application (Tarcher, 1988). King's creation of an over-the-top animated⁶² version of himself online shows his social construction of identity and personal religion which he shares with his followers (Sutcliffe, 2002). This also connects to Bloom's (1993) assumption that gnosis lies at the heart of the

⁶² King's AR character of himself can also be labelled as a hyper-real self, as he is blurring the boundaries between his real self and the virtual cartoon character of himself (Baudrillard, 1994).

American religious self and that knowledge is a way to achieve salvation. This is achieved through reconstructing the material world people find themselves in in order to change their own direction or path (Young, 2005). King is using his knowledge to reconstruct his own material world to create an alternative reality for both himself and his followers.

Cameron Dallas

Synopsis

Cameron Dallas (1994 -) is an American internet personality, most known for his use of Vine and YouTube. Dallas's internet career began in 2012 when he made videos of himself playing jokes on his friends (Gelbart, 2019). Dallas has since starred in two films *Expelled* (2014) and *The Outfield* (2015), made his own Netflix special, *Chasing Cameron* (2016), and even released music with his first single, *She Bad*, in 2015 (Gani, 2020).

Analysis

Dallas embodies many elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture, with the most notable being his desire to build community (Sebal, 1984).

Image 7. A video of Cameron Dallas playing a trick on his friend (Dallas, 2020).



Image 7 highlights this notion of wanting to build community. In this video, Dallas is messing around with his friends, with the video showing Dallas and a woman holding another man in the air. Dallas then pushes the man towards the woman so that she gets his crotch in her face as a joke (Dallas, 2020). This presents Dallas as a 'trickster'. This is because Dallas does not have any videos published on his Instagram where he is the recipient of the

prank or the butt of amusement. This suggests that Dallas may want to capitalise on pranking his friends, but not himself. If the roles were reversed in this prank in image 7, with the man standing in the woman's position, getting the woman's crotch in his face, his followers may not have perceived it as funny. This helps to show the gender politics of social media, where both friends are partaking in a sexualised attack. If this were to happen to a man over a woman, his followers may perceive it differently (Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel, 2018; Tyler, 2016). Illustrating the New Age Californian Counterculture here, these behaviours present Dallas as a mundane, everyday young adult who wants to make his followers laugh by capitalising on gender stereotyping whereby young men would find this prank funny, however, with closer analysis this could be interpreted as sexual assault from a women's perspective. By partaking in pranks with his friends and uploading them to social media for his followers to see, Dallas may give his followers a sense of community and belonging, as Sebald (1984) suggests the New Age Californian Counterculture provides. Dallas's followers may have similar values and partake in similar pranks with their friends, making Dallas someone who they admire or turn to for amusement. This highlights that Dallas is a type of secular, profane, digital idol, who his followers should devote time to, and further suggests that many social media users just want to follow someone like themselves (Reade, 2020). By being relatable, he gives his followers the impression that he is close to them, therefore they may feel that investing and devoting time into following Dallas is important (Luoma-aho et al., 2019).

Image 8. An image of Cameron Dallas holding two kittens (Dallas, 2020).

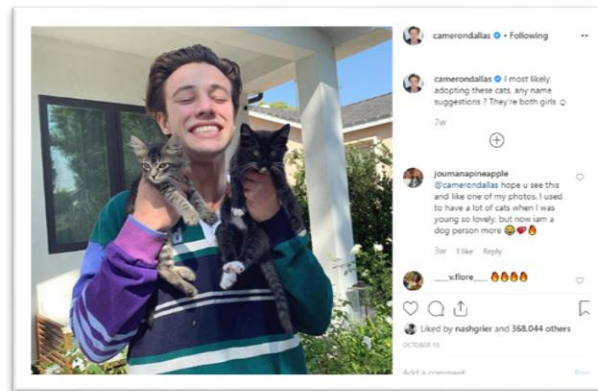
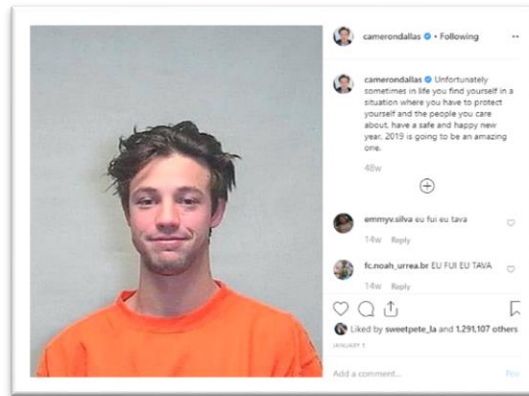


Image 8 may give the impression that the person who posted it is selfless, kind, and caring as kittens and other baby animals can often represent these traits (Fosco, 2014). In contrast to this positive representation of self, kittens and other animals such as puppies are also a type of online clickbait that influencers provide, exchanging quick escapism, amusement, and comfort for more likes, comments, shares, and followers (Gopalakrishnan, 2017). This reflects the way many influencers manipulate their followers for attention (Gilani et al., 2020). In this image, Dallas is giving the impression that he is authentic, sincere, and someone to who his followers should devote a lot of time, which reflects Tarcher's (1988) framework of a higher authentic self. It suggests that if his followers devote their time to looking at his Instagram they will be rewarded with cute images.

Image 9. A mugshot of Dallas after he was arrested for an alleged assault. The caption says, “Unfortunately sometimes in life you find yourself in situation where you have to protect yourself and the people you care about, have a safe and happy new year, 2019 is going to be an amazing one” - (Dallas, 2020).



Posting image 9 gives Dallas’s followers the impression that he is a human too who makes mistakes and wants to look out for those around him as well as himself (Maxouris and Allen, 2019). Similar to the New Age Californian Counterculture, this image suggests that Dallas has taken on his own moral code by choosing to partake in an act of violence to protect himself and others, whilst being responsible and accountable for his own actions by admitting to what he did, thereby showing a similarity to Heelas’s (1996) self-responsibility. This may be one way he chooses to present himself online, as raw, open, and vulnerable, so that he appears authentic to his followers, but is still able to use prank violence (like in image 7) to increase and maintain followers.

Chiara Ferragni

Synopsis

Chiara Ferragni (1987 -) is an Italian fashion blogger, beauty influencer, and designer. Ferragni began her fashion blog 'The Blonde Salad' in 2009 and chose to leave her law studies at Bocconi University in favour of pursuing her fashion empire (Bussini, 2016). In 2017, her first store 'Chiara Ferragni Collection' opened in Milan. Ferragni has been recognised as one of the most influential fashion designers/bloggers (Minero, 2017). Ferragni is married to producer and rapper Fedez and they have a son, Leone, born March 2018 (Muller, 2018).

Analysis

As Ferragni was dissatisfied with studying law, she left university to create her own apparel and establish her fashion empire, which demonstrates the New Age Californian Counterculture concept of an alternative reality that does not reject Western society completely (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994).

Image 10. Chiara Ferragni and Leone having a family day at the park (Ferragni, 2020).



In image 10, Ferragni constructs a narrative of herself where her own new world is through fashion. Ferragni represents that daily by wearing her own brand as an advertisement (Sutcliffe, 2003). This is shown in image 10 where Ferragni is wearing one of her own sweatshirt designs, evident from the 'eye'⁶³ that she uses to brand her fashion collections (Chiara Ferragni Collection, 2018). This image expresses how Ferragni is a successful fashion designer, inspires others to follow their passions, and that many people may envy her for her success. Ferragni's use of showing a day at the park with her son provides intimate details about what she does in her everyday life.

Image 11. Chiara Ferragni dressed in a cerise-coloured sparkly dress from a prior-night out, where she had taken a selfie and uploaded it for Instagram (Ferragni, 2020).



In the seemingly 'posed' selfie of image 11, Ferragni is worshipping herself, but also calling on her followers to worship her as well, using this selfie and her platform to attract followers to her cult of commodification (Cotter, 2019). As mentioned, Ferragni's use of selfies here provides her followers with details about her personal life. This selfie represents the idea that the New Age Californian Counterculture is a particular unorganised system of

⁶³ This eye is similar to the Mediterranean culture evil eye symbols – the evil eye is a curse or legend where a sinister gaze is said to cause misfortune and comes from the belief that a person who gains recognition and success will also cause envy from those who are around them (Hargitai, 2018).

worship and faith with an emphasis on the individual (Heelas and Houtman, 2009) and a move into a global spiritual market, away from traditional values. Social media, especially Instagram, can now be used as a platform to sell as well as consume, especially the self (Lim and Childs, 2020; Hodder, 2009).

Image 12. A video of Ferragni standing in front of an advertisement for her film Chiara Ferragni Unposted (Ferragni, 2020).



The image of Ferragni standing in front of her film advertisement, image 12, emphasises that Ferragni's fashion is representing her brand, and as with all brands, people tend to favour particular brands over others. *Chiara Ferragni Unposted* (2019) is a film about Ferragni's life as a mega-fashion-influencer and how she uses digital tools to advance herself and her career (McCall, 2019). McCall's (2019) *review of Chiara Ferragni: Unposted* suggests that by doing these things, Ferragni is able to connect with her fans and followers on a deeper level and presents herself as authentic and vulnerable. This reinforces the idea that her fashion brand should be preferred over other brands.

James Charles

Synopsis

James Charles (1999 -) is an American internet personality, makeup artist, and beauty influencer (Baker, 2019). Charles makes use of many social media platforms including YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Charles, 2020). Charles now has his own brand called “sisters” which sells apparel (Tenbarger, 2019). Charles does not have his own makeup brand like Kattan but has collaborated with Morphe to create a mini palette and eye brush set (Charles, 2020). He has also come under much scrutiny in the past due to many controversies, including joking about having the Ebola virus before visiting South Africa in 2017 (Krause, 2019), being exposed for faking the yearbook photos that allegedly made him famous on social media (Hodson, 2017), and when American makeup artist and influencer Tati Westbrook (c.1982 -) publicly ended their friendship through a YouTube video because Charles posted an Instagram story about Sugar Bear Hair Vitamins, which are in competition with Westbrook’s own hair vitamins, Halo Beauty. Westbrook’s video has since been taken down (Rodulfo, 2019). Even though Charles has come under much attack for such controversies, he still has many avid fans and followers.

Analysis

Many indicators of the New Age Californian Counterculture are pertinent to Charles’s Instagram.

Image 13. James Charles in a dress for fashion week in 2019 (Charles, 2020).



Image 13 represents Charles going against the gender norms of Western society by choosing a dress to express himself authentically, expressing the 'higher authentic self' (Tarcher, 1988). This is also similar to Nancy Fraser's critique of progressive neoliberalism in her article 'The End of Progressive Neoliberalism' (Fraser, 2017). Fraser's critique is that progressive neoliberalism is the alliance between new social movements and high-end businesses, where progressive values connect with forces of capitalism. This suggests that progressive neoliberalism is striving towards an economic agenda that threatens notions of equality, and leads to economic, social, and political polarisation; with Fraser (2017), suggesting that instead, people should be striving towards equality, emancipation, and protection against financialisation. Linking Fraser's critique with James Charles is to suggest that Charles is choosing to express himself authentically through wearing a dress at fashion week, showing progressive values. By doing this at fashion week suggests that he is doing it for capital gain and his agenda, as well as for equality. Here, Charles is capitalising on the notion of progressive neoliberalism.

Image 13 reflects the way the New Age Californian Counterculture works as a pick and mix religion of both traditional and non-traditional aspects (Aupers and Houtman, 2006)

and also self-responsibility and magical power – where a person is not defined by the constraints of mainstream society (Heelas, 1996). By choosing to wear a dress for fashion week and also being a man in the makeup industry, Charles is defying the constraints of mainstream society and breaking traditional gender norms, especially as women have dominated the face of the makeup industry and men tend to dominate the behind-the-scenes operations (Mohan, 2018). It is important to note here that there is a rise of male-makeup artists in contemporary society (Ward, 2017), with Charles being a part of that.

Image 14. Charles wearing a neon pink hoody from his 'sisters' collection (Charles, 2020).



Using the term “sisters,” in the caption of image 14, illustrates Sebald’s (1984) concept that the New Age Californian Counterculture gives a sense of belonging and community that so many people are seeking, where Charles creates his own sisterhood⁶⁴ through makeup and fashion.

⁶⁴ I must note here that the term “sisters” has long been used by the gay community as a form of endearment and community (Rocque, 2019), suggesting that Charles may be endeared or portraying himself as endeared by his followers but also expressing endearment to his followers in supporting community.

Image 15. Charles at an LGBTQIA+ parade wearing an orange outfit, with one side of the leg shorts, and the other side pants (Charles, 2020).



The performance of self in image 15 suggests that Charles is once again expressing himself authentically (Tarcher, 1988) but also that he is representing and fighting for freedom for his community, which relates to Heelas's (1996) concept of freedom being part of the New Age Californian Counterculture. Charles is choosing how to construct himself through his online profile, creating his own personal religion, and in doing so has made himself a contemporary totem to follow (Durkheim, 1912).

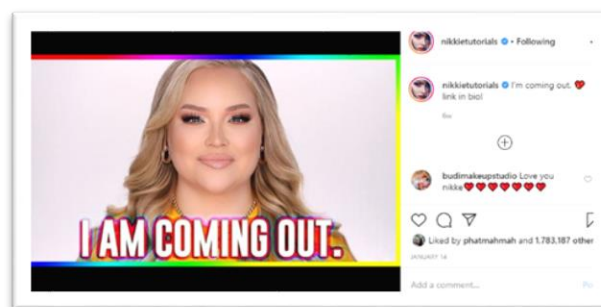
Nikkie de Jager

Synopsis

Nikkie de Jager (1994 -) 'NikkieTutorials' is a beauty vlogger and makeup artist from the Netherlands (Lodi, 2017). de Jager has been uploading videos to YouTube since she was 14 after being inspired by American reality television star Lauren Conrad (1986 -) from the show *The Hills*⁶⁵ (Ibid). de Jager became an online sensation after her YouTube video 'The Power of Makeup' was released in 2015, which shows de Jager transforming half her face with makeup to transcend her look into something considered 'more attractive/more beautiful' and shows the other half of her face with no makeup (NikkieTutorials, 2015). On January 13, 2020, de Jager released a YouTube video where she came out as a transperson. This was done because another person threatened to leak this information who was blackmailing de Jager and she wanted to release this news herself (NikkieTutorials, 2020b).

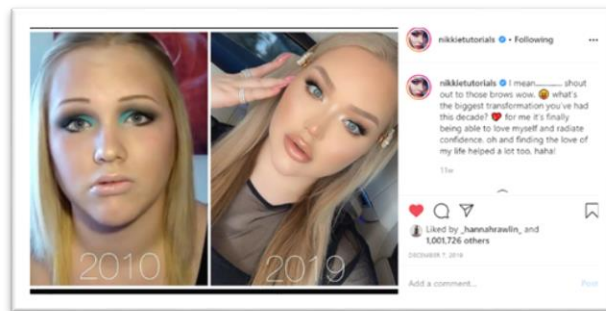
Analysis

Image 16. An advertisement for de Jager's video where she comes out as a transperson (NikkieTutorials 2020a).



⁶⁵ The Hills (2006 – 2010) was a reality television show that followed the personal lives of women pursued careers in Los Angeles (MTV, n.d).

Image 17. A transformation of de Jager's makeup improvement, showing both 2010 and 2019 (NikkieTutorials 2020a).

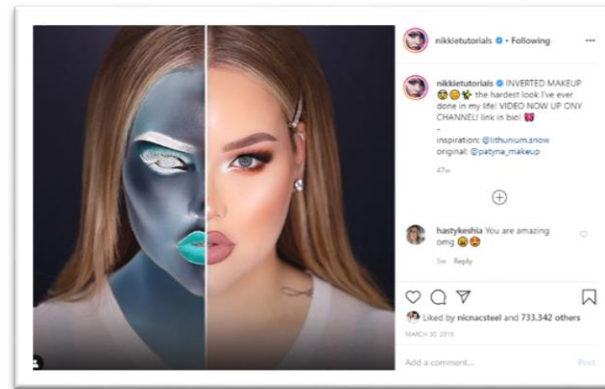


de Jager's alternative reality is represented by two images, image 16 and image 17 (NikkieTutorials, 2020a). These images represent de Jager's alternative reality, where she exercises her authentic self, mainly through makeup, but also by identifying as a transperson.⁶⁶ de Jager was dissatisfied with who she was so she decided to change (Sutcliffe, 2003; Tarcher, 1988). De Jager also expresses her passion for makeup on YouTube, which began with her video 'The power of makeup'. Showing half her face with makeup and half her face without makeup suggests that de Jager is happy with how she looks, but that she likes to enhance herself and be the best possible version of herself online. Western constructions of beauty are often contradictory, which is particularly true when it comes to makeup. There is an expectation that women will wear makeup, but they will also receive negative judgement for doing so, suggesting that the social constructions of beauty are unattainable (NikkieTutorials, 2015). de Jagger advocates for those who choose to reject aspects of 'makeup norms', by creating a safe platform where she and other people (especially women) in the makeup community can go, without the judgement

⁶⁶ Meaning that she has a different sex than to what she was assigned at birth (Bradford, 2018).

associated with self-enhancement. This is de Jager's way of creating an alternative reality she and her followers can worship the self.

Image 18. An inverted makeup look (NikkieTutorials 2020a).



The inverted makeup look in image 18,⁶⁷ which de Jager created herself (NikkieTutorials, 2020a) illustrates Aupers and Houtman's (2006) idea that the New Age Californian Counterculture is a pick and mix religion, as de Jager is mixing traditional and non-traditional makeup looks to create something different. This image also shows Heelas's (1996) unmediated individualism where she is choosing what to do, the self-ethic where she is turning to alternative unconventional makeup practices, self-responsibility and magical power where she is moving away from mainstream makeup norms and finally, freedom because she is liberated from traditional Western values and can choose her makeup looks freely. This 'inverted' makeup look would not be a look that most people would wear every day but rather set aside or made sacred for special occasions or purposes such as making YouTube tutorials (Lutz, 2019).

⁶⁷ This is a real makeup look that de Jager gives a tutorial for in one of her YouTube videos to show others how to achieve this look (NikkieTutorials, 2019).

Michelle Lewin

Synopsis

Michelle Lewin (1986) is a Venezuelan model, bodybuilder, and fitness blogger. She currently lives in Miami (Lewin, 2020). Lewin became involved with fitness due to inspiration from her husband Jimmy Lewin. They met in 2008, wed in 2010, and Jimmy is Lewin's personal trainer, agent, and social media manager (Carey, 2019). Lewin has appeared on the cover of many magazines, such as *Playboy*, *Muscle & Fitness*, and *Inside Fitness* (Martin, 2019). Lewin has come under controversy due to the promotion of weight loss pills on her Instagram story as well as being criticised for promoting unhealthy attitudes towards food, especially carbohydrates (Hosie, 2018). 'M ELLE' is Lewin's own apparel company that sells streetwear, activewear, and swimwear along with two smartphone applications 'Mealplan' and 'Fitplan' (Lewin, 2020).

Analysis

Image 19. Michelle Lewin modelling Calvin Klein underwear in a kitchen (Lewin, 2020).



Image 20. Lewin showing off her abs while holding her breasts up with a caption explaining that if her followers want to gain abs like her, they need to eat healthily and stay disciplined (Lewin, 2020).



Image 21. Lewin wearing a bodysuit with product placement of her own apparel. It is a selfie she has taken with her smartphone that has an M ELLE phone case on it (Lewin, 2020).



These three images represent Lewin's claim for the importance of personal development, individualism, and transformation of the self, much as Heelas and Houtman (2009) suggest the New Age Californian Counterculture does. By utilising product placement of her own brand as well, Lewin is attempting to sell her own apparel and is worshipping herself as sacred or a totem (Heelas, 1996; Durkheim, 1912). Lewin is creating highly sexualised images to do this, capitalising on the notion that 'sex sells' (Tyler, 2016). There are two sides to this. The first is that using highly sexualised images of oneself as an advertisement in this way can often dishearten women about the way they look and that if

they do not look like Lewin, they should not buy her apparel, and enhancing the Western 'ideal' of beauty women are expected to live up to (Ibid). Conversely, it can encourage and inspire many people to live a healthy lifestyle with exercise, so that many of Lewin's followers may devote their time to following her for inspiration and encouragement (Prichard et al., 2020). It is also important to note here that such images are heavily posed and curated, and Lewin's body will look different from another angle or in real life (Tiggeman and Anderberg, 2019).

Kayla Itsines

Synopsis

Kayla Itsines (1991 -) is an Australian personal trainer and social media influencer.

Itsines has created a series of fitness eBooks, 'Bikini Body Guides', and a workout and meal planning app, 'Sweat with Kayla', with her ex-fiancée (Mitchell, 2016).

Analysis

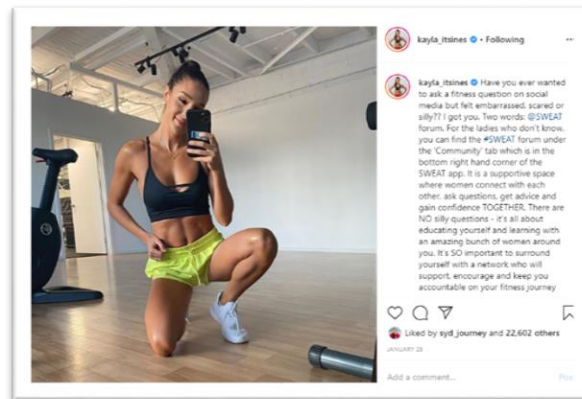
Image 22. Kayla Itsines posing as if she is taking a selfie while posing for the camera as a double pose (Itsines, 2020).



Image 23. Kayla Itsines posing as if she is taking a selfie while posing for the camera as a double pose (Itsines, 2020).



Image 24. Kayla Itsines posing as if she is taking a selfie while posing for the camera as a double pose (Itsines, 2020).



All images (22 – 24) are selfies in which Itsines appears to either be just about to exercise or has just finished exercising, with each caption encouraging her followers to exercise as well and to continuously improve themselves (Itsines, 2020). As with all of these influencers, Itsines’s profile is about commodifying the self by following someone else’s commodification. Itsines demonstrates two of Sebald’s (1984) concepts of the New Age Californian Counterculture, a sense of belonging and a design-your-own-religion. Itsines created her own routines for herself and others who were bored with traditional workout routines. In doing so via Instagram, she sought to create and curate a sense of belonging and community. All images are of Itsines in her fitness gear, suggesting she is willing to keep her followers up to date with her fitness goals and personal development, as well as commodifying herself online (Cao, 2020). Itsines Instagram also expresses Heelas’s (1996) concept that the self is sacred and may suggest that by following her as a totem, followers will be encouraged to improve themselves through exercise and, in turn, create their own new worlds through #fitspo/#fitspiration – content specifically designed to encourage self-improvement (Santarossa et al., 2019). By her followers doing this, Itsines will likely continue to accumulate revenue and more engagement.

Nash Grier

Synopsis

Nash Grier (1997 -) is an American internet personality who originally became famous for posting silly videos on Vine in 2013 before it was closed down. He also starred in the film *The Outfield* alongside Cameron Dallas (Gelbart, 2019). Greer and his fiancée Taylor Giavasis (1997 -) have one son together and he posts lots about his family lifestyle online. Currently, Grier makes use of YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat (Grier, 2020).

Analysis

Image 25. Grier and his son lying in bed with the caption “5 more minutes” – (Grier, 2020).



Image 26. Grier holding his baby son in front of a picturesque sunset (Grier, 2020).



Grier's Instagram profile portrays him as an everyday man, doing mundane and 'normal' things. For example, in both images 25 and 26, Grier is showing his son off as a cute accessory for the image. Doing this creates a sense of authenticity and realness about Grier as a person. Grier's Instagram demonstrates Hodder's (2009) idea that the New Age Californian Counterculture is a type of Western Post-Protestant spirituality in which anyone can participate and that the New Age Californian Counterculture emphasises the individual over the collective (Heelas and Houtman, 2009).

Image 27. Grier holding a puppy in a field of sunflowers (Grier, 2020).



Fosco (2014) suggests that when someone posts a picture with an animal, they come across as authentic, real, and selfless. Grier is doing just that by posing with a puppy in image 27. This may make his followers perceive him as authentic, relatable, and likeable.

Camila Coelho

Synopsis

Camila Coelho (1988 -) is an American-Brazilian makeup artist, businesswoman, and fashion blogger. She is married to Icaro Brenner, has her own fashion brand 'Camila Coelho Collection', and makes YouTube videos of makeup tutorials (Srinivasan, 2018).

Analysis

Image 28. Camila Coelho in Paris (Coelho, 2020).



Coelho's Instagram has similar features to the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Image 28 may suggest that Coelho thinks of herself as worthy of devotion from her followers by portraying herself in this way and that the New Age Californian Counterculture is a system of worship and faith with an emphasis on the individual rather than the collective (Heelas and Houtman, 2009). It may also suggest that Coelho self-worships and thinks of herself as sacred or a totem (Heelas, 1996; Durkheim, 1912).

Image 29. Coelho posing for a selfie in her own dress, telling her followers they can purchase it at Revolve (Coelho, 2020).



Image 30.. Coelho posing for a selfie in another one of her own designs (Coelho, 2020).



The two images 29 and 30 demonstrate how Coelho has created her own new world through fashion, portraying the New Age Californian Counterculture idea of an alternative reality (Sutcliffe, 2003; Bailey, 1994). This reinforces that the New Age Californian Counterculture concept of a new world is not about salvation but about being able to create one's own world inside of Western society, without rejecting it completely.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a textual analysis of the top 10 Instagram influencers using visual techniques. This chapter began with a reiteration of the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture, provided the context of influencers versus celebrities, gave a discussion of each influencer's net worth, a discussion of significant overall themes, and finally concluded with an analysis of each Instagram influencer.

Chapter Seven: The Discussion

Introduction

The 'social' element from 'social media' emphasises that social media platforms are used for social interactions, where users create content, share content, chat with other people, and also a technology that allows for the extension of self online (Hawai and Samhai, 2017; Belk, 2013). Arguably, a Foucauldian technology of the self is occurring online where the individual attempts to transform the self through social media technologies in order to find happiness, meaning, or perfection (Foucault, 1988). As well as these explorations of self, a social media user can commodify the neoliberal self, where they think of the self as a business (Foucault and Senellart, 2008; Scharff, 2015). The physical self is engaging in technology where the conceptual extension of self transcends the constraints of the physical world into the virtual, online world (Hawai and Samhai, 2017; Belk, 2013). Counter-claims to the idea of social media emphasising sociality are that it can be a place where people can become anti-social, standoffish, narcissistic, and self-absorbed (Hatcher, 2017). Instagram is a public platform where users devote time to liking content, commenting on posts, and following other users in order to create a personalised package of meaning through their digital platform.⁶⁸ Meanings gained from social media may include but are not limited to: having a sense of purpose (Sbarra, Briskin, and Slatcher, 2019), identity (knowing who one is as a person), collective identity (Boyd, 2014a), coping with nihilistic feelings (Lomberg, 2015), feelings of improved social connectedness and

⁶⁸ The term 'digital platform' here refers to any places online that can be accessed through technology (Dufva and Dufva, 2019).

community (Boyd, 2014a; Costin and Vignoles, 2020), and feelings of belonging (Liu, Shao, and Fan, 2018; van Eldik, Kneer, and Jansz, 2019).

Out of individualised engagement and curating of content on social media, it can be argued that there occurs a form of Foucauldian technology of the self that, in religious terms, can be seen as analogous to a type of digital “Sheiliaism” where users can personalise their Instagram feeds by who they choose to follow, what content they choose to look at, and what content they choose to interact with (Foucault, 1988; Bellah et al., 1985, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin, 2020). By echoing the benefits from both explicit and implicit religions, social media, arguably, can yield similar results so that it is similar to the New Age Californian Counterculture. The three research questions addressed in this thesis are: (1) Is the use of social media similar to the creation of alternative realities in New Age Californian Counterculture in that individuals use social media to create alternative realities to the one/s they had previously? (2) Do social media users present the self as worthy of devotion/worship? If so, in what ways? And (3) What attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture can be applied to Instagram influencers? To answer these questions, this socially constructed mixed-methods study consists of analysing my social media practices using an autoethnography, and a qualitative textual analysis of the top 10 Instagram influencers according to Influencer Marketing (2019). The findings from my autoethnography were spread throughout this thesis but were predominantly explored in Chapter Five. The findings from the textual analysis were outlined in Chapter Six. The discussion in this chapter, Chapter Seven, provides a summary of my key findings, and sociological interpretations of them exploring the following themes: The Ubiquity of Social Media in the Everyday World, Smartphone Sacrifices, Secular Rituals, Belonging NOT

Believing, Hyper-Real Selves, and Sheilas. It also includes some implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Key Findings

Autoethnography Findings

Building on the findings of the autoethnography, this thesis argues that social media platforms are reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture where many individuals, such as myself, use social media to create alternative realities and present the self as worthy of devotion. Social media shapes a person's identity and meaning in a similar way that religion and culture often shape identity and meaning (Noor and Hendricks, 2011). Social media expresses many elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture, where people create alternative realities - which I argue is something that occurs by default due to the nature of the platforms and participation of the users, and users present the self as worthy of devotion. This reflects the idea that the New Age Californian Counterculture is continuously evolving and it can be argued, predominately practiced online through social media, where many people are unaware they are doing so (Heelas, 1996; Gustin, 2013; Aguiler et al., 2017).

The use of a smartphone in contemporary society, in my experience, has become an everyday secular ritual where the habitual behaviours people engage in contribute to parts of who they are. This was evident from my autoethnography. This supports the heavily Protestant metaphorical claim that the smartphone acts as a New Age Californian bible/sacred text substitute (Adams, 2017). If a person were to carry a bible/sacred text around as they do a smartphone in contemporary society, others would probably perceive them as odd, eccentric, different, and potentially even ostracise them for what they are doing which would have severe consequences (Verway, 2018). If they were carrying around a bible, then they may be searching for affirmations, something to help them cope with

life's existence, existentialism, nihilism, and many of the everyday anxieties that people face (Housaix, 2019). As there has been the rise of technologies such as the smartphone in contemporary society, this thesis argues that the smartphone is a device that pervades daily life far more than a bible ever could. This means that the smartphone as a bible substitute is far more popular and successful than a bible as a personal device in both private and public spaces, meaning that a person uses their smartphone both in public and in the privacy of their own home. No matter where a person is in the world, no matter the time, if a person has access to a smartphone, reception, and a way to connect to the internet; for example, through mobile data or Wi-Fi, they will have access to social media as a bible/sacred text substitute, and in turn, their implicit religion that can be labelled a type of noosphere (Bareither and Bareither, 2019).⁶⁹

Some other socio-political-cultural findings of the autoethnography were that social media platforms can give users community, help create and enhance connections – both online and offline connections, can encourage people to 'fit in' with the crowd, facilitate belongingness and sociality, allow digital distraction to occur, and provide greater meaning for those who may be seeking it (Boyd, 2014a). Social media can help with existential feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety by providing escapism in moments of distress (Housiaux, 2019).

As a social media user, there are different ways I use the platforms: Facebook provides belonging, community, and connections. Instagram provides a place for me to share my photography and is enhanced by my everyday secular rituals where I lose time

⁶⁹ Alternatively, for many people, they can access their own personal religion through the smartphone by accessing a digital bible (Verway, 2018).

scrolling my feed. Snapchat is used as a way of 'fitting in' with what my friends do. Twitter and Reddit provide digital distractions and ways to cope with the stresses of the world and LinkedIn is where I can show off my accomplishments. My use of all of these platforms links to both *religare* (to bind together) and *relegere* (to re-read) as I access these accounts mainly through my smartphone, meaning that the smartphone allows social media to pervade my own daily life and that I can gain connections and community with others.

Constant use of social media may suggest that there is a lack of alternative things to do, or that it is a way to relieve boredom, or that people may not want to partake in other things and would rather spend time scrolling on their smartphone. This links to time management as a conflicting process, where people have contradictory feelings about how to spend their time (Ytnre-Arne et al., 2020). From interviews of 50 smartphone users in Norway, Ytnre-Arne et al. (2020) found that the smartphone was integral to participant's daily routines, and they expressed the importance of smartphone use for organisation. This creates a contradictory feeling where a smartphone user may feel their use of their smartphone is important for their lives, while simultaneously, feel like they may be missing out on certain things⁷⁰ because of how much time they spend using their smartphone to access the internet and social media (Balta et al., 2020; Ytnre-Arne et al., 2020). Allowing the smartphone to be part of our everyday lives means that with the use of a smartphone, a person can associate themselves with local, global, and social events (Ibid). In support of these ideas, an interview with American historian Dr. Susan J. Matt (1967-) suggests that the smartphone provides "constant companionship – or at least the promise of constant companionship." Meaning that the smartphone is always there, whether or not someone is

⁷⁰ This phenomenon is known as FOMO (the fear of missing out) (Balta et al., 2020).

using it, but it is always there when someone needs it (Illing, 2019). In relating this to my autoethnography, I carry my smartphone everywhere I go, as both a way to feel safe and as a way to connect to the everyday world often as a replacement for real-life interactions and to feel as if I am a part of the globalised world. For many people, digital technologies such as the smartphone, which allows access to social media, are what constitutes their everyday world (Seetharanan et al., 2020). For myself, the smartphone co-exists with me as a tool to access the internet, where I use it in conflicting ways, both for access to information and for entertainment. Arguably, I feel it has become an extension of myself. The smartphone as an extension of myself relates to transhumanism, which is a philosophical movement advocating for the human condition to be enhanced through technology, where many transhumanists believe that consciousness will live on through digital technologies (Haraway, 2006; Davis, 1998). Thus, blurring the lines between reality and simulations of reality.

People may choose to use social media applications on smartphones instead of the alternative options such as observing what is around them, thinking, being bored, staring into space, reading a physical copy of the newspaper, or reading a book (Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). This is because the smartphone enables its users to access online newspapers, read books online, and make use of time both productively and unproductively, instead of just doing nothing, or in the past, smoking and looking, thinking, talking, and is one significantly 'small' tool that allows people to do more than just one thing (Illing, 2019; Melumad and Pham, 2020). As the smartphone acts as a tool to access the internet and social media, it relates to many fundamental human needs. These needs are sociality, connections, and community (Boyd, 2014a), to find out what is going on in the world (Sbarra, Briskin and

Slatcher, 2019), and to see ourselves reflected in intangible spaces that the physical spaces around us do not offer (Azad et al., 2016).

Textual Analysis Findings

Building on findings from the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques of Instagram influencers in Chapter Six, this thesis argues that they are participating in a form of an implicit, New Age Californian Counterculture as they express some attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture. These influencers also act as contemporary totems where they give meaning to their followers and represent contemporary cultural values and symbols; they are a cult of saints (Durkheim 1912; McDonnell and Douglas, 2019). As meaning is subjective, each 'follower' will gain a different personalised package of meaning (Seyfi and Soyda, 2017).

I argue that every influencer acts as a contemporary totem that encourages their followers to worship them. For example, I argue that Huda Kattan acts as a contemporary totem because she presents herself as authentic, sacred, worthy of devotion and makes her followers feel connected to her by encouraging them to interact with her, which helps build a sense of community and belonging that Sebald (1984) suggests are characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture. I argue that Zach King's Instagram demonstrates King as a totem because he provides escapism to his followers by relying on technology to connect people in a way that resembles church-going behaviour. I argue that Cameron Dallas presents himself as a totem on Instagram by building community where he presents himself as a type of secular, profane digital idol to whom his followers should devote time while coming across as authentic and relatable. This was evident by Dallas posting a mugshot of himself and taking responsibility for his actions that is the redemptive action of

confession and seeking absolution. Chiara Ferragni worships herself online to encourage a cult of commodification from her followers and creates connections with her followers by presenting herself as authentic and showing her followers carefully curated personal glimpses into her everyday world. James Charles acts as a totem by building community and endearment by calling his followers “sisters.” de Jager utilises unconventional makeup looks to express herself and creates community through her passion for makeup and giving makeup tutorials on social media. Michelle Lewin’s Instagram demonstrates her as a totem because she worships herself and provides community through fitness and fashion. Kayla Itsines acts as a totem on Instagram because she encourages her followers to exercise and creates community and belonging. Nash Grier acts as a totem because he offers relatability to his followers and Camila Coelho acts as a totem because arguably, it appears she is worshipping herself on Instagram. All of these influencers can also be described as ‘Sheilas’ where they are contemporary hyperreal totems people follow, which is discussed more in-depth later in this chapter.

Another example of a New Age Californian Counterculture characteristic presented in some of these Instagram influencer’s accounts is that they have created alternative realities online. For example, I argue that Huda Kattan constructs her own alternative reality through the demonstration and selling of makeup. As well as selling makeup, as is common on Instagram, the seller is also what is sold (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). Kattan is presenting herself as a commodity to sell her makeup commodities. Zach King creates an alternative reality through his own knowledge of illusions and technology he provides to his followers on Instagram. I argue that Chiara Ferragni has created an alternative reality by creating a fashion empire. Nikkie de Jager is another influencer who creates alternative realities online through makeup, where she recently expressed her “true” authentic self

through makeup and coming out as a transperson, which is an expression of transforming the self, and Camila Coelho creates her own alternative reality through fashion.

Furthermore, Kayla Itsines builds an alternative reality by encouraging others to improve themselves through exercise and designs her own workouts where she takes ideas from both traditional workout routines and non-traditional routines, which helps build community and connection with her followers.

Some traits of the New Age Californian Counterculture identified by Heelas (1996), I claim, are expressed in some of these Instagram influencer's accounts. For example, Zach King conveys the self-ethic and magical power, which expresses a post-religious re-enchantment of magic through technology and capitalism. Dallas also represents these traits outlined by Heelas (1996). Other examples of New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics that I argue are expressed in these Instagram influencer's accounts are James Charles's Instagram representing his higher authentic self by breaking away from traditional gender norms and personal development, individualism, and transformation in Michelle Lewin's Instagram and Kayla Itsines's Instagram.

Significant overall themes were also identified from the analysis of Instagram influencers. These themes were Totems, Selfies, and Relatability, Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity, Commodification of Self, and Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism. In addition to these overall themes, a discussion of each influencer's net worth was also explored in Chapter Six. This discussion highlighted that the makeup and fashion industries are likely higher in revenue due to both makeup and fashion being tools with which a person can transform themselves and enhance the way they look. Both makeup and fashion are now available to much broader audiences than they used to be. For

example, makeup becoming more affordable and accessible for many people through social media (Biron, 2019), fashion weeks being live-streamed on social media (McDowell, 2017), and other products being advertised on social media, especially Instagram (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). In relation to social media allowing commodities to become more accessible and affordable for broader audiences, the New Age Californian Counterculture is also accessible for anyone who wishes to participate in it via various tools and methods, most of which can be accessed from using a smartphone (Latham, 2004).

Sociological Interpretations

From the findings of this study, I suggest that the use of social media is akin to the New Age Californian Counterculture and that social media influencers are contemporary totems that users follow, devote their time to, and often feel connected to which is strengthened by parasocial relationships. The higher the perceived parasocial relationship an influencer's follower has with them, the more likely they are to keep gaining engagement and building community with them via social media. By following makeup influencers such as Huda Kattan, a social media user may feel connected to her on a more intimate level, which means they may be more likely to purchase her products demonstrating that the advertising succeeds and that consumers are more likely to feel good when using her products. By following influencers such as Kayla Itsines, users can find other people with similar interests online; have online connections with those people, as well as a chance to create new offline connections. This is seen with "Kayla's Army" where people get together to exercise, helping create community and connections that they may not have had otherwise.

The Ubiquity of Social Media in the Everyday World

The presence of social media and smartphones in the everyday world is ubiquitous (Appel et al., 2020). German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858 – 1918), in his work *Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), suggests that the social structures of everyday life such as the relationship between an individual and the features of a society that transcend individual existence and experience must be explored (Simmel, 2012). One feature of the Metropolis "The City" is the constant stimulus of both internal and external factors, which can intensify an individual's emotional life (Ibid). Some manifestations of Metropolitan life are

favourability towards capitalist exchanges, a growing division of labour, a blasé attitude, a sense of personal freedom, and the rise of impersonality and rationality (Ibid). The structures that make up the Metropolitan life are in conflict with one another, where personal freedom is evident, but it is harder to achieve individuation (Ibid). In relating this to the 21st century, the smartphone is the constant stimulus that a social media user can use to transcend their conceptual existence from the real world into the virtual world (Hawai and Samaha, 2017). Here, I suggest that the use of the smartphone can be a way to cope with and escape from the non-digital stimulus of Metropolitan life as a way to achieve individuation.

Meaning can be inscribed to particular areas on social media, where a social media user can explore expressions of self, and as a user's group affiliations and modes of self-expression increase, individuals will find their own communities for every one of their desires (Chayko, 2015). Simultaneously, the individual's place in the structure of a social media platform still reinforces the capitalist notions of power, divisions of labour, and goods and services exchanges (Feldman, 2012; Gangneux, 2019). This means that the social media user is competing with other social media users for community, status, capital, and belonging.⁷¹ This is evident in both my autoethnography and textual analysis of Instagram influencers. As noted in my autoethnography, I gain different things from different social media platforms where I find different communities for my own personal interests. The Instagram influencers I have analysed in this thesis have created online communities through their use of Instagram, where they have conceptually transcended their

⁷¹ This is beneficial for the social media platforms as the more competition and more users, the more data they can harvest (Kauffman et al., 2020).

performance of selves⁷² into the virtual world. By doing this, the influencers gain community, status, and capital but also reinforce the neoliberal capitalist notions of power by commodifying the self. Having different types of Instagram influencers who specialise in particular areas means that there is likely a community online for every single social media user. If not, then they have the option to create one.

Smartphone Sacrifices

For the majority of social media users, social media platforms are predominantly used on a smartphone rather than a computer or laptop (Handley, 2019). This characterises my use also of social media where I would rather scroll Facebook or Instagram via my smartphone than on a computer. This is likely due to social media platforms being more user-friendly on a smartphone (Arthur, 2012). This is because social media platforms have been specifically designed and continuously updated and improved to make the platforms more user-friendly on the smartphone, ensuring that people have constant and easy access to them (Korzynski, Paniagua, and Rodriguez-Montemayor, 2019). Through the excessive use of the smartphone and endless social media scrolling, many social media users may be sacrificing time just to scroll and use their smartphones. As previously mentioned, Ytre-Arne et al. (2020) suggested that the smartphone is a tool that co-exists with humans and often co-constructs⁷³ how people live their lives, where their participants in their study stated that

⁷² 'Performance of selves' is a reference to Goffman's idea that people present themselves in particular ways online (Goffman, 1969).

⁷³ Heidegger (1977, p.287) says, "According to ancient doctrine, the essence of a thing is considered to be what the thing is. We ask the question concerning technology when we ask what it is. Everyone knows the two statements that answer our question. One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity. The two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity." In applying Heidegger's theory of technology here is to suggest that the use of the smartphone is purely a human activity that humans can manipulate to their own benefit and personal gain.

smartphone checking is part of their daily routines. In addition to sacrificing time, many social media users are sacrificing mental downtime.

In religious terminology, sacrifice is to give up something usually that of value for a higher purpose, that is, to give up something to divine being/s as an act of worship (Sheehan, 2009). For example, offering an animal as a sacrifice (Ibid). The foundation of sacrifice, according to the French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897 – 1962), is that which is destroyed. Sacrifice is a mode of consumption, where the sacrifice is not necessarily to kill but to relinquish and give for return (Bataille, Botting, and Wilson, 1997). In the secular sense, sacrifice is giving up something of value in order to get something else thought to be more valuable (Daly, 2009). An Instagram influencer may give up time, time with family, their own mental downtime, and other miscellaneous commitments to be an Instagram influencer (Stoldt et al., 2019). This is because for an Instagram influencer, their office is their smartphone (Ibid), and they have to put in extravagant amounts of effort to maintain their status as an influencer (Enke and Borchers, 2019). For example, social media influencers have to maintain parasocial relationships with their followers, be active in their engagement with followers by replying to messages and comments, provide consistent original content, and listen to what their followers want (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This is similar to what many people would give up to lead a Protestant sect (Giodan and Swatos, 2011). In traditional religions, people do not go to service multiple times day and night, which emphasises the adaptability of smartphone use and social media use as a New Religious Movement (Sbarra, Briskin, and Slatcher, 2019; Cartner-Morley, 2020).

Sacrificing time to scroll social media in contemporary society suggests that there is a shift in what constitutes the sacred. This could be giving up time in order to edit and re-edit

representations of the self in social media platforms, where Instagram influencers are spending time curating their 'ideal' selves online to come across as authentic to their followers (Fox et al., 2017). Social media users and the followers of Instagram influencers may be viewed as those who are sacrificing time by people who do not use social media at all and may not see it as the best use of time. In many ways, the social media user, the audience of the influencer, is sacrificing their own time and personal data in order to devote time to the influencer.

In relation to the top 10 Instagram influencers analysed in this thesis, audiences who choose to devote their time to such influencers are gaining a sense of sacrality and more in-depth parasocial relationships. Those who choose to devote their time to following Huda Kattan, James Charles, and Nikki de Jager are gaining information about makeup, which offers new ideas and ways to transform the self, as well as community and connection through makeup, and offering a sense of identity. In sacrificing time to follow the influencers Zach King, Cameron Dallas, and Nash Grier, a social media user is gaining escapism from the everyday world, entertainment, laughs, and the excitement of illusions. By sacrificing time to follow the influencers Chiara Ferragni and Camila Coelho, a social media user is gaining information about fashion, what to wear, what is in season, and how they can feel like themselves in the clothing they choose to wear. Lastly, by sacrificing time to follow the influencers Michelle Lewin and Kayla Itsines, a social media user is gaining access to new fitness regimes as well as the prospect of self-transformation through exercise. The smartphone means that the users have constant access to social media and are constantly connected to others, which demonstrates the New Age Californian Counterculture idea that everything is interconnected in the cosmos. Without the convenience of this device, people would be less likely to engage with social media or be as

preoccupied with representations of the self online (Deguara, 2019). On social media, a user can post as little or as much content as they like, post self-enhancing content, and curate and construct their content to portray the self in a particular way (Campbell and McCain, 2018). This is not a new concept as many people have always been deeply preoccupied with the self (Ibid) but social media enables a new avenue for exploring the representations of self and further, new ways of transcending the conceptual self (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Nygaard, 2019).

Secular Rituals

Social media platforms in their new expressions of forms of the New Age Californian Counterculture also means that people gain their own personalised package of meaning from everyday mundane things, give greater meaning to Instagram influencers, and participate in everyday rituals (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018; Seyfi and Soyda, 2017).

Rituals can bring people together through collective experience and practice, both online and offline, and can also be individual experiences by repetitive individual participation and practice (Rufi et al., 2016). Schnell (2011, p.397) says, "Religion satisfies a need for meaning in life. It connects individuals and socializes members into a community. Faith and rituals enhance a subjective feeling of control." When people partake in acts of rituals like constant scrolling on Instagram to connect with a community of other users, they often feel more in control of their lives (Zulli, 2018). People often have specific times and places when they scroll through Instagram, which can be calming often distracting them from the stressors of everyday life (Dolan et al., 2019). For me, Instagram scrolling occurs both in the morning when I have just woken up and at night right before I go to sleep. These

Instagram rituals can also be a sign of or an escape from boredom, a person not wanting to do anything else, or a distraction from the realities of the everyday mundane world. Lastly, these rituals may enhance real-world experiences (Rufi et al., 2016; Perham, 2018). This fits with previous research from Diehl, Zauberman, and Barasch's (2016) study on rituals before eating mentioned in Chapter Five. When I go travelling and take images to put on my Instagram story, I feel good and even more excited about the trip because I know I am going to get engagement from my followers and when I take pictures of food before I eat it, it is possible that it makes me enjoy the food more.

I must note here that I intend to continue to follow these influencers after this research is complete, as I enjoyed seeing their posts so much suggesting that I have been converted, evangelised into worshipping these influencers as idols. It is possible to say here that the top 10 Instagram influencers that I have analysed have had an influential impact on my life. Expanding on this idea is to suggest that some positive aspects of social media use reflect religion and counterculture, where expressions of the New Age Californian Counterculture have developed on social media. Personally, I am gaining a connection with these Instagram influencers who are far outside my immediate life (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019), gaining a sense of community (Boyd, 2014a), collective activity (O'Meara, 2019), and a ritualised engagement at certain times and places that can help to take myself or my mind out of stressful or mundane times (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018). As these influencers have influenced my life, I choose to devote time to looking at, liking, and commenting on their Instagram posts where by giving a 'like' or 'comment' to one of these influencers, I am giving a digital tithe to them (Forbes and Zampelli, 1997). That is, an offering or payment to the divine beings that I worship, in this case, the Instagram influencers, with the idea that if a certain amount of what devotees earn goes back to who

they worship, the more a person can earn for themselves, and in turn the influencer (O'Meara, 2019). This can be a beneficial partnership for both parties involved for two main reasons. Firstly, the influencer is highly likely to benefit from getting a like or comment as a digital tithe from their followers, and their engagement rates are likely to stay up. Secondly, I benefit from this because another follower of an influencer may see my likes or comment on a post and look at my own Instagram account, creating a constant cycle of following (Ibid).

I have also been influenced to live my own life more intentionally, which I consider an intentional technique from the Instagram influencers analysed in this thesis, where I have taken inspiration from these Instagram influencers to connect with my own social media followers in new ways. In choosing to continue to follow these influencers, I have become more knowledgeable about what is trending in fashion, and about makeup and beauty products. I have access to fitness regimes, and if I feel like it, entertainment. I am encouraged to supply free data to Instagram and in doing so, supporting the influencers to maintain their influencer status by the amount of engagement they get online (O'Meara, 2019). This fits with the notion of digital capitalism as my own personal time and data from scrolling Instagram and looking at the content these influencers post, is being exploited (Fuchs, 2018), as I am being unpaid for my labour (Zulli, 2018). Yet, I am willingly complicit in my own exploitation.

Belonging NOT Believing

Parasocial relationships emphasise the behaviours of people over their beliefs or religiosity. This ties into the concept of belonging not believing which has previously been used to understand those who join communes, religious groups, or other communities to

gain a sense of belonging even if they do not agree, or fully agree, with the beliefs of such a group (McIntosh, 2015). This concept reinforces the belongingness hypothesis presented in Chapter Five (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). From a survey of 166 online participants, Martin (2018) found that the more times per hour a person checked their Facebook or Instagram profile the more the person is expressing a need to belong. Belonging to a community on social media, or having social media accounts, in general, may mean that people feel a sense of belonging – just by doing. People do not have to congregate in a real-life setting in order to feel connected to others and may find it easier to connect to non-physically present bodies, but regularly liking, commenting, and interacting with other social media users may give people the same sense of belonging that they desire. This is reflected in my findings in Chapter Five, as I believe I gain belonging and community through social media; especially Facebook and Instagram. All 10 of the Instagram influencers analysed in Chapter Six advocate for and create belonging/community on Instagram. The desire to belong or to ‘fit in’ is considered an intrinsic motivation to be socially accepted by others and is a drive for people to seek out and maintain long-lasting relationships with other people (Cherry, 2020). When the desire to belong is achieved, it may mean that many people will feel like they are part of something bigger than they are, often reaching self-actualisation in the process. As well as this, higher perceived social support from others, especially online, has many positive health and well-being benefits (Walton and Cohen, 2007). For example, having higher perceived social support is correlated with being protective against depressive symptoms and stress, higher self-esteem, and subjective well-being (Ionnou, Kassianosi, and Symeou, 2019; Poudel, Gurung, and Khanal, 2020; Gülaçti, 2010).⁷⁴

⁷⁴ One counter-argument to this claim is that in contemporary society, social media use is increasing, which means mental health issues should be decreasing. However, the opposite is occurring, where mental health

Hyper-Real Selves

This thesis argues that Instagram influencers commodify the hyper-real self. In Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyper-reality, the real self and the fictional self are blended together with no clarity as to where one begins, and one ends. With the ever-increasing saturation of social media, for those who are heavy users of social media, there is not always a clear distinction between the real self and the online self, especially because the online self helps to define the offline self (Desjardins, 2019). Blau (2015) writes, "We use Instagram to curate our lives. And through this very act of selecting and editing and sharing the narrative of our lives, we create the narrative of our lives." It is apparent in my own observation of the top 10 Instagram influencers that each influencer is using Instagram to curate their lives, selecting and sharing particular aspects of their lives in order to choose their own narrative, which is writing themselves into existence or being on Instagram (Baym, 2010). The analysis presented in Chapter Six demonstrates how Instagram influencers can commodify the self in order to create capital, gain economic value and assets, and in turn, boost their follower count and engagement rates. The question here is not why they do this, but rather, it is why are these people followed; what makes them so special? To answer this question, I draw on Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*, which is a series of essays written about America's obsession with counterfeit reality and simulacra (Eco, 1987). Eco argues that Disneyland has been designed to look unquestionably hyper-realistic, which takes its visitors imaginations elsewhere, creating an illusion that makes it more desirable for people to want to go to Disneyland and consume that reality. Toy houses

issues are continuing to increase for a multitude of reasons (Berryman, Ferguson, and Negy, 2018). This exemplifies that context is important and more research on social media needs to be done.

on the Main Street of Disneyland encourage visitors to enter them to see what is inside, but when a person gets inside, it is a supermarket disguised as a toy house, which encourages visitors to mass purchase products, all the while believing they are in an alternative reality. Eco (1987) posits that this is a consumer ideology that is perpetually reproduced. Disneyland becomes a place that can extend its visitors' reality beyond what they believe is possible in the real world (Ibid). By gaining 'more' or a 'hyper' reality, the visitor is more likely to continue to return again and again, continuing to consume (Barroso, 2019). In applying this theory to Instagram influencers, I argue that by commodifying their hyper-real selves these influencers are providing alternative realities for their followers. The illusions these influencers create mean that they are more likely to be 'followed' online and continuously gain engagement from others. That is, people are more likely to keep coming back for more in the same way they would visit Disneyland, which helps increase consumerism. They are also providing parasocial relationships, community, connections, belonging, comfort, and meaning for their followers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Additionally, by word of mouth or simply just by seeing someone follow one of these influencers, another person may start to follow them as they could feel the need to 'fit in' or use it as a way to connect with another social media user with similar interests⁷⁵ (Shareef et al., 2020; Abbariki, 2018). As previously mentioned, I suggested that these Instagram influencers act as contemporary totems. By social media users following the influencer as a totem, the followers become hyper-real via the act of totemic devotion, and the influencer as totem becomes a commodified hyper-real self on Instagram.

⁷⁵ This also emphasises the importance of the share function on Facebook and the significance of Facebook and Instagram being connected. With the increasing modality of sharing on both platforms, some people may be privy to more things than they were before and in turn, experience the fear of missing out (FOMO) (Roberts and David, 2020).

Sheilas

Chapter Three outlines the concept of 'Sheiliasm', which is about creating a personalised religion by heavily focusing on the self as the divine (Bellah et al., 1985; Grimshaw, 2013). Individuals who 'pick and choose' elements to construct their own individual religion are acting as 'Sheilas'. I argue that as a social media user I can personalise my social media platforms. I can choose when I want to use them, what social media platforms I use and why, and can present myself online so that I come across as a digital 'Sheila', meaning that I am enabled to present and engage with social media in a particular way. I can 'pick and choose' whom I follow on social media, who I choose to interact with, and what content I provide online. As a type of 'pick and mix' religion, a person on social media can develop their own form of 'the bible'⁷⁶ or sacred text on their smartphone, which is personalised based on those they choose to follow and interact with online. In this analysis, I use other 'Sheilas' (Instagram influencers) to 'Sheiliate' myself, as the social media user.

The Instagram influencers analysed in Chapter Six have developed their personalised religions based on a specific focus. For, Huda Kattan, Nikki de Jager, and James Charles this is through makeup. Zach King has created a re-enchantment personal religion of magic, which offers escape to his followers. Cameron Dallas has created a personal religion based on his own life and is continuously capitalising on that religion. Chiara Ferragni and Camila Coelho have created their own personal religions through fashion, as has James Charles. Michelle Lewin and Kayla Itsines have created their own personal fitness religions.

⁷⁶ Meaning their own personalised sacred text and their own individualised religion that is accessed through the smartphone.

Implications

These findings indicate that social media, particularly Instagram, is similar to the implicit religion of the New Age Californian Counterculture. The similarities are such that I argue many social media users are participating in an implicit religion where the habitual behaviours they participate in characterise their religion. From this, a social media user, like myself, can gain belonging, a sense of intimacy, connections, friendships, and contemporary totems to follow. These are all similar elements to those someone would gain from traditional religion (Mochon, Norton, and Ariely, 2011). For society, and Western society, in particular, this means there is more emphasis on the smartphone. It is no longer understood as a want, it is a need; a necessity (Panova and Carbonell, 2018). Consumer products even emphasise the necessity of the smartphone, such as smartphone watches, pockets designed specifically for the smartphone in bags and jackets, armbands designed for using the smartphone to listen to music while exercising, and wallet-type phone cases (Stevens, 2018). Many people even take their smartphone into the bathroom with them, suggesting that the smartphone has become ingrained in everyday life (Sulleyman, 2017; Rivers, 2016). Because this device is considered so important in society, it means that communication is changing. Rather than giving others a phone number, many people give out an email/gmail address or a social media account and this is becoming more and more normalised as time goes on (Lampen, 2019). Technologies such as social media, the internet, and smartphones are continuously re-developed and improved so that more access can occur, content can be sold, more data can be harvested, and more smartphones can be sold (Kim, 2014; Kauffman et al., 2020). This emphasises consumerism.

One thing in particular that this study led me to do was to try and see if I could use tactics similar to those used by the Instagram influencers I analysed to boost my own Instagram account following. I tried to be more interactive with my followers and reply to messages/comments a lot more than I did previously. I even tried to ask questions in the caption of my posts. I really struggled to keep up with messaging people back. I felt exhausted at times when I thought the conversation had ended, but they messaged or commented again. This made me feel like if I did not respond or continue the conversation then they would not continue to follow me. This emphasises the reciprocal sacrifice of time and energy of both an Instagram influencer and follower (O'Meara, 2019). It suggests that being a social media influencer is a full-time job and a way of life many people live by (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Followers worship an influencer in order to maintain their devotion, with an unwritten covenantal relationship driven by capitalism (Ibid). An audience is able to turn quickly against a particular influencer if they disagree with something the influencer has done, which can have negative consequences such as losing an entire audience overnight, and potentially, losing one's career (Ibid).

If someone is not on social media, they likely do not have access to a lot of content due to many social media sites needing a user to log in to be able to see content (Bell, 2019). If a user can see content, they may not be able to post without making an account, they may not be privy to the information posted about them online, and they may not be invited to certain events (Boyd, 2014a). For example, if a person creates a Facebook event and needs to invite their one friend who is not on any social media platform, they might forget to let them know about it highlighting that that friend is missing out (Ibid). It also means that this non-social media user does not have access to influencers so likely may not have the same types of outcomes that others experiences. This can lead to existential

questions like “does this person really exist if they are not on social media?” Technically, yes, as biological embodied humans, they still exist, but their social media personas do not. As previously mentioned, a social media user can write themselves into existence online, continuing to exist in that platform for as long as they contribute (Baym, 2010). In contrast, a non-social media⁷⁷ user may find themselves less distracted and more productive in the workplace, less likely to be bored all the time or able to use boredom productively (Illing, 2019), and more likely to be experiencing the world without attaching themselves to a phone (Marsh, 2016). However, more and more people are required to be online than at any time before. People are joining Facebook because companies are using and requiring the use of Facebook and Instagram more than ever and because it has replaced the traditional event invitation (Schwab, 2018). Many universities have turned to social media as a way of communicating with their students and staff and use social media as a way of letting them know what is going on (Ridley, 2020).

⁷⁷ Drawing on Marxist theory (Marx and O'Malley, 1970), one socio-economic consequence of this digital divide is that social media as a new religion is the new opiate of the digital masses, the new opiate of the digital capitalism.

Limitations/Recommendations

The generalisability of this study is limited as my sample size was only 11. One participant was myself for my autoethnography and the other 10 nonparticipants were the top 10 Instagram influencers. If I had chosen to conduct a textual analysis on a larger sample, for example, the top 100 Instagram influencers, it may be more generalisable. This means that I am only able to say that social media is akin to or reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture, not that it is the New Age Californian Counterculture specifically. To avoid this limitation in the future, a larger sample size of social media users as audience members may be useful in discussing how people relate to Instagram influencers.

The reliability of this study is impacted by my own subjective biases when it comes to social media. I am an avid social media user, so the findings and my interpretations of the findings are impacted by my own worldviews and understandings. As this was a socially constructed mixed-methods approach to research, I believe that my bias is important. This is because my research focused on the behavioural patterns of social media users like myself, which can help contribute to a broader understanding of social, political, and cultural norms in Western society. Future research could consider behavioural patterns of various generations to evaluate the impact this might have on the findings.

The replicability of this study is impacted by the autoethnography analysis. This is because no autoethnography findings will ever be the same as they are based purely on a person's own interpretations of themselves. The replicability of the qualitative textual analysis is relatively straightforward and therefore, should be easy to reproduce. First, a researcher would need access to an Instagram account, would have to find the 10 most followed influencers at the time of their research, take three purposively selected

screenshots of Instagram posts and then analyse their Instagram profiles with the same New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics I used. A researcher would also be able to adapt this study by using other social media platforms to analyse and could also apply a different type of religion if they wished.

Originally, I was going to use ten images from each influencer's Instagram profile to analyse. I narrowed this down to three images from each profile. This significantly helped me to emphasise the New Age Californian Counterculture attributes. If I had chosen to go with the original ten, I believe these ideas would have not been as pronounced as they are in this current thesis. By using only three images, I was able to write more analysis on each individual influencer, whereas if I went with the original ten images this would have limited the amount of words I had for my analysis. Another limitation of this is purposive sampling, a technique used to intuitively choose data for analysis. The limitation of this technique is that my eyes may have been subconsciously drawn to certain images over others, suggesting an already subjective bias from my perspective. A randomised sample of images and influencers in future research may help eliminate such biases.

Another limitation is the exclusion of mega totems. I briefly referred to 'mega totems' like Kim Kardashian, Kanye West, Kylie Jenner, and Beyoncé in Chapter Six. Although these people can be considered contemporary mega totems who many devote their time to following, I chose to focus on those who created their influence on social media rather than those who use social media to add to their already existing influence. In this regard, mega totems can be likened to explicit religions that often use social media to add to their success (Hjarvard, 2011). This can also be understood as a form of popular culture religion that mega totems exist within (Green et al., 2014). Popular culture, usually, content that is

commercially produced and mass-consumed, is often focused on social commentary of media, lifestyle, and leisure (Parker, 2011). The overlapping of religion and popular culture helps create hyper-real religions (Possamai, 2012). Thus, there is a binding together of religion, popular culture, and social media, where popular culture practices are incorporated into religious beliefs (Cheong, 2017; Possamai, 2012). As a binding together of religion, popular culture, and social media occurs, I suggest that social media as a New Religious Movement is similar to Jean-Luc Marion's concept of religion as a saturated phenomenon, where religion renders itself to the point of excess (a saturation of choice) of almost rendering itself invisible (Marion, 2008; de Vries, 2008). This is because social media saturates contemporary society, it has become normalised, and fades into the background, which makes it hard to objectively separate religion and what is secular (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). However, this helps to communicate what implicit religions are manifesting in everyday life. Future research may benefit from doing a similar study based on 'mega totems' that would most likely yield similar findings as this thesis.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Seven has provided the key findings from the autoethnography analysis spread throughout this thesis as well as key findings from the textual analysis of Instagram influencers. This chapter then provided sociological interpretations of the findings, exploring the themes: The Ubiquity of Social Media in the Everyday World, Smartphone Sacrifices, Secular Rituals, Belonging NOT Believing, Hyper-Real Selves, and Sheilas. I then outlined some implications of the findings mainly focusing on the smartphone and the concept of what happens if someone is not on social media. Finally, this chapter provided some limitations of the findings of this study and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Social media is a New Religious Movement that expresses elements of the New Age Californian Counterculture. By analysing my own social media use and a sample of Instagram influencers, this thesis was able to provide an understanding of how social media is a New Religious Movement in contemporary Western society. Key findings from the autoethnography demonstrated how many social media users, such as myself, use social media platforms to create alternative realities online, present the self as worthy of devotion/worship from their followers, and that the smartphone is a New Age Californian bible/sacred text substitute, where the habitual and ritualistic behaviours a person partakes in constitutes their religion. This highlights how in contemporary Western society social media is a New Religious Movement reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture. Key findings from the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques demonstrated how Instagram influencers convey some attributes of the New Age Californian Counterculture on Instagram and that they act as contemporary totems; that is, they are a cult of saints many social media influencers devote time to following. This demonstrates that Instagram is one social media platform reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Important implications of this research are that it is possible to understand how social media and religion are interconnected in the contemporary West, where implicit religions can occur, and why social media users behave in certain ways with the use of their smartphones and social media technologies. Social media platforms are also used for similar reasons as to why someone would affiliate with a religion such as the New Age Californian Counterculture. Because the smartphone and social media technologies have fundamentally changed the way communication occurs in contemporary society those who actively choose

not to social media are not always privy to the same benefits/information as a social media user is. Some limitations of this research included having a limited sample size, subjectivity bias, and excluding 'mega totems.' Future research should address how 'mega totems' reflect the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Chapter Two provided the methodological processes utilised throughout this thesis. I chose to use a socially constructionist mixed-methods approach to demonstrate how religion and social media are interrelated in the contemporary West. Research methods I used were an autoethnography of my own social media use as well as a textual analysis using visual analysis techniques to analyse a sample of Instagram influencers. The social media platform Instagram was given considerable focus throughout this thesis as it is one platform I consistently use myself as well as a highly visual platform, emphasising a shift from text-based media into image-based social media. This chapter provided the research questions, the research paradigm, and the research design used in this thesis.

Chapter Three provided definitions of religion, explicit religion, and implicit religion. This chapter also differentiated between the New Age and the New Age Californian Counterculture as the latter is what was reflected in social media. The New Age Californian Counterculture stemmed from the 1960s/1970s counterculture stemming from America. This chapter outlined the history of the New Age Californian Countercultures from the 1960s to contemporary society. This history allowed me to identify key characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture, which are used to analyse myself and a sample of Instagram influences to gain an understanding of how social media is a New Religious Movement reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture.

Chapter Four provided demonstrated how in contemporary Western society the rise of technologies has led to a digital canopy as a play on Peter Berger's *The Digital Canopy* (Berger, 1967). This chapter explored a brief history of communication technologies, internet technologies, and a history of social media platforms. This chapter also highlighted the gendered underpinnings of both social media and the New Age Californian Counterculture as well as how social media is currently engaged with in today's Western world.

Chapter Five provided an autoethnography of my own social media use. This chapter gave an overview of some affordances of social media emphasising how social media is designed to encourage users to partake in specific behaviours online and gave an account of my personal smartphone and social media use to highlight that in the New Age Californian Counterculture and social media, the self is central. This means it is important to both note and make use of my own subjective biases throughout this thesis, as the self is what is worshipped. Following my own social media use, this chapter provided some themes that related my social media use with the New Age Californian Counterculture. These themes were: Contemporary Religiosity, Habitual and Ritualistic Behaviour, Community and Connections, Escapism, and The Digital Canopy.

Chapter Six provided the textual analysis using visual analysis techniques findings. This chapter analysed a sample of Instagram influencers identified by purposive sampling. First, this chapter provided a reiteration of the New Age Californian Counterculture characteristics used to apply to these influencers, gave an overview of the differences between social media influencers and celebrities, discussed the net worth of each Instagram influencer analysed in this thesis, and gave a discussion of significant overall themes. These

themes were: Totems, Selfies, and Relatability, Representations of Self and Expressions of Authenticity, Commodification of Self, and Advertising, Religion, and Consumerism. Lastly, a supporting analysis was given where I applied the characteristics of the New Age Californian Counterculture to each Instagram influencer using screenshots of images from their Instagram accounts.

Chapter Seven highlighted the key findings of this research demonstrating how social media is a New Religious Movement similar to that of the New Age Californian Counterculture. This chapter provided some sociological interpretations of the findings exploring The Ubiquity of Social Media in the Everyday World, Smartphone Sacrifices, Secular Rituals, Belonging NOT believing, Hyper-Real Selves, and Sheilas. This chapter also gave some implications for this research suggesting that social media platforms, in particular, Instagram, are a New Religious Movement reflective of the New Age Californian Counterculture in new ways. Finally, this chapter gave some limitations of this research and recommendations for future research on this topic.

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